

Arts Build Communities

Summary

Arts Build Communities is a new initiative led by Rutgers University's Professional Development Institute to help public agencies, nonprofit organizations, funders and policy makers make better choices regarding arts and community and economic development. Key activities include training and technical assistance for those involved in arts and community-based economic development and an annual Cultural Vitality Index of New Jersey's communities. This index will be a "one-stop shop" that can be used to help make cost-effective about community and economic development initiatives involving arts and culture.

Keystone partners in this initiative are Rutgers University's Center for Government Services, the ArtPride New Jersey Foundation, Center for the Arts, Fund for an Open Society, Middlesex County Cultural and Heritage Commission and the New Jersey League of Municipalities.

The Professional Development Institute, which is part of the Edward J. Bloustein School of Planning and Public Policy, received a grant of \$20,000 from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts to begin the project. We are actively seeking support from foundations and corporations.

Through our work, mayors, business administrators, planners, nonprofit organization directors and community leaders will have better knowledge about the connection between arts and community well-being. Among the biggest beneficiaries of this initiative will be New Jersey's artists. As more civic leaders and officials recognize the benefits of the arts in their communities and economies, the work of artists will become more valued - by officials and by a wider variety of funders.

More public officials in New Jersey and around the United States recognize the community and economic benefits of the arts. While a positive trend, this also leads to increased competition for limited resources and strategies that may not be sustainable. ABC will help leaders who value the arts to better justify expenditures of time and resources. It will demonstrate the economic and community value of cultural development to leaders who might otherwise see arts as a luxury. It will better help arts organizations better understand how their work fits into an overall community and economic development context.

Goals

The goals of ABC are:

- * To build the capacity of elected and appointed officials to make more informed decisions about cultural planning.
- * To generate statistical and illustrative information that officials, planners, arts advocates and community groups can use to evaluate cultural development in their communities.
- * To generate information that researchers can use to explore the connection among cultural, economic and community development.
- * To build a learning community of organizations, associations, researchers, artists. This learning community will help researchers focus on the most critical issues and questions facing New Jersey communities. It will also be a stable hub for leaders to share and get insights, and get support for undertaking cultural development initiatives. This will not just be a learning community - it will be an action community.

ABC activities:

* Annual Cultural Vitality Index of New Jersey's communities. Similar to the Legislative District Data Book produced by Rutgers University's Center for Government Services, the Cultural Vitality Index will measure indicators of cultural development and planning in the state's 566 municipalities and 21 counties. We will also produce an annual report assessing cultural development trends and conditions, as well as identifying model practices in New Jersey. Policymakers and planners will be able to use the Index and report to assess the cultural health of their communities and to explore improvements in their policy making and planning. Cultural vitality indexes - also known as creative vitality indexes - are used in other parts of the United States to provide benchmarks for the health of the arts and creative economies. They also demonstrate the value of the cultural sector to community economies. While there are several inventories of cultural organizations, this index will provide data to connect arts, community development and economic development.

* Training and development in cultural planning and policymaking. These continuing education efforts can take several forms, based on the needs and interests of the learners. Based on our successful experience with professional development, we can offer online courses, training workshops, and development programs that combine training with coaching and collaborative problem solving. Courses will be targeted to elected and appointed officials, planning and policy consultants, and staff of organizations that address arts and community or economic development. This training would also include seminars and special sessions at the New Jersey League of Municipalities annual conference, the American Planning Association New Jersey Chapter annual conference, and other, similar events. We will also reach out to the Association of County Cultural and Heritage Commissions. Prior to choosing a training medium, we will survey our potential audiences to determine their interests and preferred ways of learning.

Arts Build Communities will help to further Arts Plan New Jersey, which is recognized as the official guiding document for cultural development in the state. The #1 goal of Arts Plan New Jersey is to "grow thriving and vibrant communities in New Jersey through the arts." The plan encourages municipalities to engage in more cultural planning and creating environments that attract and retain cultural organizations, and seeks comprehensive approaches to sharing knowledge about cultural development that helps lawmakers and administrators, businesses, arts organizations and communities. Through various approaches, ABC will help to realize this goal on a statewide level.

Measures of success

The Arts Build Communities Council (discussed later in this proposal) will develop a complete set of evaluation measures. Among the measures for the first year will be our ability to collect data from a wide range of sources, engage our audiences in policy and strategic dialogues around issues addressed by ABC, produce documents and events that would be considered useful by our diverse audiences around the state, and increase knowledge about cultural planning and development among local officials and organizational leaders.

Community input

The keystone partners of ABC have extensive networks covering thousands of elected and appointed officials, artists, community organizations, and planning and policy professionals throughout New Jersey. Through their networks, the partners will reach out to provide information, get feedback, and encourage others to participate in dialogues and strategy sessions.

Project director and contact: Leonardo Vazquez, Director, Professional Development Institute, Rutgers University, 732-932-3822, x711, vazquezl@rutgers.edu