

Grantee Name
University of Illinois, Krannert Center
Project Title
To support Making Communities Visible: utilizing the Krannert Center and SITI Company to engage community groups in activities that shift the paradigm of contemporary expectations about what art means through an expanded sense of community
Project Progress and Successes
<p>Mission</p> <p>Krannert Center for the Performing Arts is dedicated to the advancement of education, research, and public engagement through the pursuit of excellence and innovation in the performing arts. Embracing the art of the past as well as the art of our time, Krannert Center supports the belief that creativity is a core human characteristic and that the arts hold uniquely transformative potential. Through its multiple and integrated roles as classroom, laboratory, and public square, Krannert Center serves as a touchstone for the exploration and expansion of human experience.</p> <p>Overview</p> <p>The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation-funded Making Communities Visible project has strengthened the Center's capacity to further its mission by engaging four unique communities within the broader Champaign, Urbana, and University of Illinois community who historically have not been sufficiently visible within Krannert Center. With a three-year goal of transforming passive cultures into active cultures in order to further diversify its audience, Krannert Center continues to work closely and collaboratively with Anne Bogart, SITI Company, and the following diverse and distinct communities:</p> <p>African American members of a faith-based community, represented by the Banks Bridgewater Lewis Fine Arts Academy (BBL);</p> <p>young professionals/entrepreneurial change-makers (YPECM);</p> <p>first-generation University of Illinois college students; and</p> <p>families, teachers, administrators, and students from Urbana's Leal Elementary School who speak English as a second language (ESL community).</p> <p>Making Communities Visible (MCV) has been an extraordinarily transformative experience for Krannert Center for the Performing Arts (KCPA) in terms of its approach to engagement work. Originally designed to culminate in Year Two with a preconceived and carefully planned "daylong event in four acts" with each community responsible for one act, it became clear--through continued and various interactions around the arts and ensemble-building--that high priority should be placed on developing a core, foundational relationship with each community group before culminating activities were designed, while letting each community drive the process around their distinctive needs. Our collective team discovered that simply understanding one another--in terms of needs, desires, and capabilities--was a prerequisite to future collaboration, and we chose to put aside early ideas about performance outcomes in order to focus on core relationship-building. Ensemble work--between and among KCPA, SITI, and each community group--played a critical role in helping each to understand the groups' respective strengths, weaknesses, perceptions,</p>

attitudes, and potential areas of promise for engagement with one another. At the completion of Year Two, each of the six collaborating communities has a significantly deeper understanding of how our collective work might intersect with each community's work and move us towards shared goals. As a result, a model for community-driven engagement is clearly emerging, one that holds great potential for the future of arts engagement.

Schedule

Through July 2015, SITI Company Co-Founder and Co-Artistic Director Anne Bogart and SITI Company members Ellen Lauren, Leon Ingulsrud, Stephen Webber, Akiko Aizawa, and Michelle Preston were in residence at Krannert Center a total of 81 days (Doris Duke Charitable Foundation approved the transfer of Year Two days-in-residence to Year Three). Between residencies, Krannert Center staff continued conversations with each community through multiple meetings and attendance at community events (including Krannert Center performances). A brief overview of highlights is below.

Individual Community Highlights

Faith-Based African American Community

Helping BBL Fine Arts Academy Build Organizational Capacity and Sustainability

After two years of deep collaborative work with SITI and Krannert Center, Nathaniel Banks of Banks Bridgewater Lewis Fine Arts Academy (BBL) emerged as a leader within this community. Nathaniel is a jazz musician and educator, native of Champaign, and retired University of Illinois faculty member; BBL is a small nonprofit organization focusing on performance education in the local black community. As we deepened our relationship, it became clear that one of the most powerful ways KCPA and SITI could collaborate with this community was through the sharing of knowledge and skill in performance, production, and management in support of the organization's existing goal to produce and present Dreamgirls. Assisting BBL in building its organizational capacity and helping to ensure its future sustainability became the primary focus of our relationship.

A Dreamgirls Steering Committee was formed during Year Two and met bimonthly. Comprising various Krannert Center staff, board members of BBL, and the Director of BBL, the committee worked collaboratively to plan activities with SITI for residencies in January, February, and July, and to design and implement educational workshops, auditions, and timelines for the ultimate production of Dreamgirls. Originally scheduled to take place in July of 2015, the performance was postponed until Year Three to allow additional time for building BBL's organizational capacity before fully producing the musical.

Activity highlights during Year Two included a Krannert Center-sponsored Theatre Workshop Series Kick-Off Event at Salem Baptist Church with members of SITI Company; "A Workshop Series: How to Build a Community Theatre Production" on consecutive Saturday mornings from January 31-March 7 and featuring three separate educational tracks each week (performance, production, and management) taught by SITI, Krannert Center, and other University of Illinois faculty/staff; a SITI-led Interactive Workshop; a focused meeting with Anne Bogart, Leon, Stephen, and Akiko from SITI and the leadership team of BBL; acting workshops with members of the Youth Group from Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church and young performers in the CUperStar Competition (organizations for predominantly black youth); biweekly meetings with the Dreamgirls Steering Committee; and auditions and workshops for the principals of the Dreamgirls performance.

Young Professionals/Entrepreneurial Change-Makers Community Development through the Arts

Engagement activities with this community, originally named "young professionals," quickly demonstrated a common theme among those individuals who participated: each was interested in utilizing the arts in innovative ways to support local community development within a social justice framework, and each was eager to gain a deeper understanding of Krannert Center's work in order to utilize the Center's resources and initiatives in their work. Re-named "Young Professionals/Entrepreneurial Change-Makers (YPECM), Krannert Center activities created a nexus for their work, and the Center became their home.

Krannert Center currently hosts YPECM monthly gatherings with a structure that includes a performing arts activity, an exploration of themes around community development and social justice, and a sharing of work by one of the participants. Year Two saw a significant solidification of the group's mission, structure, and knowledge, while plans for Year Three include exploring the creation of an organizational structure embedded within Krannert Center, development of an electronic communication tool, and the completion of a specific, mutually determined project or event at Krannert Center curated by the YPECM. Members of this community are also deeply committed to offering their talents, skills, and work in support of the Dreamgirls project, which they view within the lens of their social justice work.

Highlights with YPECM during Year Two included monthly gatherings; a SITI-led ensemble-building workshop and a social gathering at Figure One, a downtown art gallery; an interactive workshop with SITI and all MCV project communities, held at the local park district; interaction in Decatur, Illinois around Krannert Center's and the University of Illinois' Decatur Arts Project, designed to engage African American youth from low-income neighborhoods; and a day-long intensive workshop with University Housing staff (YPECM members are heavily involved with this unit on campus), led by SITI members utilizing techniques designed for movement, "clarifying focus and practice," and "defining core values and practices."

First-Generation College Students Change-Makers

We learned from first-generation college students that they are eager to influence their worlds--similar to the Young Professionals/Entrepreneurial Change-Makers--and want to invest their time and effort into learning more about Krannert Center and working on tangible projects with clear direction. As a result, first-generation college students attended a number of performances at Krannert Center and engaged with various activities planned by YPECM. Identifying similar motivations and goals between these two groups, plans for Year Three call for a merging of First-Generation College Students with the YPECM community.

Highlights from Year Two include a presentation by a first-generation college student to an area school group attending a performance at Krannert Center regarding her personal path to college and experiences at Illinois; participation in two separate YPECM gatherings with SITI Company and campus/community arts advocates/activists to brainstorm and plan ways to more deeply engage with the Center and to learn more about art-based and/or entrepreneurial projects, community-building efforts, and growing networks around the arts; and participation in several Dreamgirls workshops.

ESL community at Leal Elementary School

Building a Stronger Team of School Leaders and Families around the Arts

Through various engagement activities that deepened our relationship with this community, project members determined that a prerequisite to implementing significant arts-based work with the students was to create a leadership team comprising teachers, administrators, and family members of students within the ESL community. Through a more formalized leadership construct, the team believes the arts can be an effective means for promoting cultural knowledge, communication, and dialogue within the Leal School environment. Year Three plans include team-building sessions with teachers, parents, and administrators; a series of mutually agreed-upon activities; and collaboration with SITI around Steel Hammer (for the adult population connected with Leal) and the legend of John Henry (for the student population).

Highlights from Year Two include a set of student-focused workshops led by SITI Company members Leon Ingulsrud and Ellen Lauren, exploring storytelling through theatre with personal narratives, musical ballads, and stories of Lincoln's early years in Illinois. SITI's Leon Ingulsrud and Stephen Webber also facilitated an interaction among Leal Dual Language Program families, fine arts teachers in the Urbana elementary school district, and Krannert Center staff. The interaction began with movement activities designed to promote interconnection, trust, and ensemble, and continued with a group conversation about the arts and intercultural understanding at Leal School. This conversation served as the impetus for our 2015-16 plans.

In addition to, and likely because of, interactions with SITI, Leal School has markedly increased its participation in our Youth Series (school day performances presented at Krannert Center). In year one, 140 tickets were ordered by long-time participating teachers; year two, 364 tickets ordered with participation from teachers who had not ordered tickets before; orders for the coming season include entire grade levels attending, in some cases multiple performances, for a total of 614 tickets.

Challenges / Obstacles / Failures Encountered in the Project

Managing Relationship Dynamics

Cognizant of managing each relationship respectfully, Krannert Center staff remained focused on a balanced, collaborative dynamic, ensuring the Center and SITI were equal partners with no more or less influence than any other member of the group. In carefully attending to this dynamic, roles and responsibilities were sometimes unclear (e.g. Does Krannert Center take the lead in creating a production schedule for Dreamgirls, or will the Center be perceived as overly controlling?). As relationships deepened, it became clear that each community's needs and perceptions were different, and it was necessary to customize these dynamics to each unique community.

Dreamgirls: Securing a Director

The highest priority was placed by the Dreamgirls Steering Committee on securing a director for the production who is a member of the black community and interested in

working collaboratively with a group of individuals who had little to no experience with producing a musical theatre piece. Ultimately this process was time-consuming, as the project team approached numerous possible individuals, ultimately finding an appropriate and willing director who unfortunately withdrew after principal auditions were held due to another professional opportunity.

Sustained Participation by Community Members

Sustained participation by community members throughout the year continued to be an ongoing challenge for each of the communities involved, although core leaders emerged during Year Two from each community, greatly stabilizing the relationships. Busy schedules, a general lack of experience with the arts, reluctance to engage, and the inherent transitional state of this university-based community are likely contributing factors. Through continued efforts in relationship-building, the team has gained confidence in the project's long-term sustainability.

Complexity

The complexity of the project, with four separate and disparate communities each with numerous representatives, combined with SITI Company's and Krannert Center's mutually full calendars, continued to create an ongoing logistical challenge.

What was learned from these that might be of benefit to others?

A recent blog post by Anne Bogart beautifully captures a lesson gained through Making Communities Visible:

Faith is not something that I have any more than a vacuum is anything that I can retain. Faith is an action. A vacuum is available at any moment; I simply have to become aware of it. To work in the presence of faith I must be willing to embark upon a journey with no guarantees of the outcome. I must cultivate the courage, the faith, to step into the vacuum, to walk into the unknown, to meet whatever the next moment brings. What a thrill!

An Emerging Community-Driven Engagement Model

Making Communities Visible has been an extraordinarily transformative experience for Krannert Center in terms of its approach to engagement work. While Krannert Center has historically been aware of community needs when engaging with any one particular community, this project has placed the highest priority on the critical importance of relationship-building prior to activity planning within a community-driven approach. We learned that having a preconceived notion of activities--no matter how good the intention--carries the potential to harm the relationship by appearing arrogant and presumptive. Instead, Krannert Center is learning, through the project's experience, that a potentially promising, emerging model for engagement contains the following ingredients and phases:

Emerging Values, Principles, and Knowledge

Relationship-building is a prerequisite to building demand for the arts.

Allowing communities to drive the project best ensures meaningful and impactful engagement that successfully meets real needs within communities.

Identifying the potential intersection of community needs and artist/arts organization resources, projects can emerge that have generative potential for all entities.

Any one entity is not necessarily a homogenous group with similar beliefs, attitudes, and traits. Diversity is apparent within groups as well as between groups.

Highest priority must be placed on ensuring a respectful and balanced dynamic between each member of the group.

Adequate time must be allowed to form relationships and for leaders to emerge from those relationships; placing overly prescribed timelines or expectations is potentially harmful to the project outcome.

Relationships can be formed and strengthened through a variety of activities, planned or spontaneous (formal, informal, structured, unstructured, social, professional, etc.).

It is important for members of each entity to immerse themselves in each other's environments (e.g. artists/organizational staff members attend events and gatherings in the community and community members attend events at the organization, etc.);

Ensemble-building, a unique skill of the arts community, holds great promise as a tool in engaging with and among communities.

Sustainability is of the highest priority; communities are unwilling to engage fully without the expectation of sustainability.

Relationship-Building/Ensemble-Building

Much focus and time on relationship-building has emerged as a prerequisite to successful engagement work. For each entity (community group, artists, arts organization), the following areas of exploration were important to the process:

what are the key goals and aspirations of each?

what are the most pressing needs, fears, and concerns of each?

what assets/strengths does each entity bring to the relationship?

how might the members of our collective intersect in a way that is mutually beneficial?

do we have preconceived notions about one another or histories that need to be addressed?

The Arc of Relationship-Building and Project Planning: Sequential and Flexible

The MCV team learned early in the process that sequential steps in relationship-building--without any perceived or tangible outcomes--are a critical component. Additionally, the team learned that the process must remain continually flexible and informed by ongoing dialogue. Change is constant and should be embraced.

Community-Driven Project Planning

As the relationship between entities is strengthened, steps can be taken to plan engagement activities, based on community desires and needs that intersect with the resources of the artists and arts organization. This step--the moment when a potential

project is identified--is highly reliant on the particular circumstances of each community and the evolving relationships. For example, the Dreamgirls project emerged relatively quickly in the process while the ESL Community at Leal School project remains in a relationship-building phase as the team learned that more involvement by a broader spectrum of teachers, administrators, and families was necessary prior to identifying a distinct project.

The MCV team also learned that clear expectations and carefully articulated roles and responsibilities for collectively planned and community-driven engagement initiatives are important and should be determined at a point in the process when the relationship is ready to embark on such activities.

Krannert Center is deeply grateful for the generosity of The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation in supporting the Making Communities Visible project and looks forward to Year Three as we focus on further engagement and evaluation of the project.

Links to relevant website(s) and/or project publications, reports, etc.

Making Communities Visible 2014-15 highlights
Link to be sent through e-mail

If someone wishes to speak with your organization further about your project, would there be a willing contact? Y/N

If yes, please provide contact name and information for preferred method of contact (email, phone, etc).

Rebecca McBride, rmcbride@illinois.edu