

STRENGTHENING Arts Organizations and Leaders Results and Lessons from ArtsLab 2012-2014

Summary Report

March 9, 2015

By David Scheie, Ph.D., Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry

ArtsLab works to strengthen the arts sector as a resource for community vitality in the upper Midwest. Its mission is “to nurture a vibrant regional arts eco-system that ensures that cultural leaders have the skills, ideas, and mindset of adaptability and resiliency needed to thrive in a world of continuous change.” ArtsLab is rooted in the belief that arts and culture are essential to vibrant communities, competitive industries and strong economies. It works with community arts organizations in an intensive developmental process to strengthen their resiliency, adaptability, and to adopt sustainable business practices. Its goals are to:

- Increase the pool of mature and engaged cultural leadership able to meet 21st century demands
- Build the resilience and strengthen the presence of forward-thinking arts organizations
- Demonstrate the power of the arts to enhance community vitality and engagement.

The ArtsLab approach combines in-depth and peer-based training for teams of leaders of small and mid-sized community arts organizations, to strengthen their ability to respond to rapid changes in the economy, demographics, technology and communications. ArtsLab conducted its third program cycle from September 2012 through October 2014.

Committed to excellence and continuous improvement, ArtsLab includes evaluation as a core element. Developmental, multi-layered evaluation is used to gauge the progress of individual participating organizations and to assess and strengthen the effectiveness of the ArtsLab program as a whole. ArtsLab commissioned an independent evaluation from Touchstone Center for Collaborative Inquiry, a Minneapolis-based learning and evaluation firm to complete an independent evaluation of the 2012-2014 program cycle.

ArtsLab 2012-2014 was found to be a highly effective program for strengthening arts organizations and leaders. It was thoughtfully designed and skillfully implemented. Almost all participants expressed strong appreciation for what they learned and how their organizations grew stronger through their ArtsLab experience. The list of tangible improvements and growth indicators achieved by participant organizations is long and impressive.

Important design features in ArtsLab 2012-2014

- Team approach, requiring consistent team involvement including board, staff and artist;
- Organization baseline assessment;
- Peer learning retreats, webinars and additional seminars, guided by the ArtsLab curriculum team;
- Adherence to experiential, participatory and learner-shaped adult education principles of learning;
- Strategy Roadmap: an interactive business plan;
- Mentorship, coaching and support built into the package for each grantee organization;
- Advancement grant to support work identified as key to advancement of strategic goals.

Core values

Four interrelated values shone through the curriculum and process of ArtsLab 2012-2014.

- Affirming unique strengths and vision of each organization individually;
- Committed to excellence as a program and as expectation of participating organizations;
- Learning-focused listening and observation enabling insightful feedback rather than generic advice;
- Justice and community relevance—attentiveness to community context.

Key Results for participating organizations

Three kinds of change were most significant and common among cohort organizations. These changes were interrelated. Virtually every organization's ArtsLab team reported they had clarified their organizational identity and mission. Nearly every organization said its board had become more active and effective. Most organizations reported that their fundraising abilities had improved.

Clarified identity and mission

The most important result for almost all participating organizations was that they became clearer about their core identity and mission. They identified what they were deeply passionate about; what they were especially good at; and what drives their resource engine and generates revenue for them; and they developed the language that enabled them to express this vividly and succinctly. They learned how to "tell their story".

Gaining clarity and confidence about who they were and what they wanted to do produced ripple benefits:

- Improved decision-making about prospective new programs, projects and partners
- More efficient and effective grant-writing and fundraising appeals
- Improved recruitment and orientation of new staff and board members.

Energized and more strategic boards

Participating in the Strategy Roadmap process of clarifying organizational identity and developing an organizational business plan helped board members understand the organization's purpose better. A board member from one organization said: "Before ArtsLab, some board members said they didn't know how to describe the work. Now they know! There's more engagement by the board – attendance is up, energy is different. Board members are more confident, able to speak intelligently about the organization."

Boards at several organizations became more focused on governance and long-range vision, reducing their involvement with operational details. Many restructured their meetings to a consent agenda format that reduced the time spent on routine matters and opened up space for more strategic, visionary conversations.

Enhanced fund development ability

Improved fund raising ability was another result cited by almost every ArtsLab organization. Partly this grew out of the clarified identity and sense of purpose: "Now, after all this practice, we have a chiseled, refined, nuanced process for finding the right words," said one managing director.

Some organizations launched new fundraising projects rooted in their clarified sense of identity. Several organizations said they gained an understanding of a funding gap as a normal and essential part of an organization's financial picture: it expresses an expansive and bold vision of what the organization could accomplish if it only had the resources. Planning that kind of funding gap creates a space that invites others to step up with resources, and gives focus and motivation to organizational fund development efforts.

Across the ArtsLab cohort, a majority of organizations increased their revenue from individual donors. Median annual revenues from individual donors nearly doubled from 2011 to 2013.

Other Results for participating organizations

Strategic focus

Increased clarity of mission and identity, along with ArtsLab's focus on building a sustainable business model, resulted in some organizations setting clearer growth goals and plans. "We're planning farther into the future," said one managing director. Another reflected "We have a vision, three years out, of what our infrastructure must be to be a stable foundation for further growth. We've articulated the staff we'd like to have in the next three to five years," said its artistic director.

Artistic program expansion

Twelve organizations reported they expanded, upgraded or refined their programmatic activities during their ArtsLab years. Several used their "strategy screen" tool developed through ArtsLab to make decisions about how to respond to new program ideas and invitations, including saying "no" to ideas that didn't align with their clarified core mission or "not yet" to opportunities that didn't match their current capacity.

Community relationships

For several organizations, clarifying who they identified as their community was an important part of clarifying their organizational identity and mission. They saw how they fit into their community: their distinctive role and contribution.

Websites, communication, and information technology

At least eight organizations upgraded their websites or improved their digital communications. For some, this was closely rooted in their identity and mission crystallization.

Internal culture and leadership

Executive director transitions

Five of the fifteen organizations went through executive director searches during these two years. In addition, two organizations had installed a new executive director in the year before ArtsLab, and an eighth organization announced that its longtime executive director would be leaving in mid-2015. All of these organizations credited ArtsLab with making these transitions smoother and easier for them.

Staff restructuring or expansion

Nearly half of the organizations expanded or restructured their staffs. Some used Advancement Grant funds to invest in fundraising personnel, adding an administrative associate, and adding teaching artist hours. "We recognized we needed to add another layer of administrative staff," said one executive director. That new layer of administrative staff created space where the senior staff could think through and implement changes in personnel policies.

Conclusions and recommendations

ArtsLab 2012-2014 was a highly effective program for strengthening arts organizations and leaders. The list of tangible improvements and growth indicators achieved by participant organizations is long and impressive. ArtsLab was thoughtfully designed and skillfully implemented. Almost all participants expressed strong appreciation for what they learned and how their organizations grew stronger through their ArtsLab experience.

Strengths to carry forward

1. Core values: The four interrelated values shone through the curriculum and process of ArtsLab 2012-2014, animating and elevating the entire experience.

2. Curriculum: The key topics were those that helped participants strengthen their identity and strategic focus; their financial management; and their funding development.
3. Team participation: Requiring staff and board team participation in the ArtsLab process together is a powerful strategy for achieving organizational growth.
4. Mentorship: A mentor's regular, ongoing contact reinforced accountability and sustained momentum.
5. Peer interactions in a cohort model: Having organizations work through the ArtsLab process in a cohort dramatically expands the learning and support resources available to them.
6. Retreats: The extended time of weekend retreats was an important contributor to participants' learning.
7. Nimble resource people: ArtsLab 2012-2014 was impressive for the high level of competence across all the curriculum team members and mentors.
8. Advancement grants: Providing Advancement grants for self-designed Advancement projects added a valuable level of ambition, action and accountability to the ArtsLab experience.

Suggestions for improvement

Further ideas offer ways in which ArtsLab could be improved focus on minor adjustments to the design of learning events and the content of the curriculum in the following areas:

1. Learning opportunities: When participants have less prior knowledge and experience, they are more likely to prefer larger presentations and more teacher-directed learning sessions. When a cohort includes mainly highly-experienced participants, ArtsLab may be more effective if it uses designs that are even more learner-directed.
2. Digital Communications Curriculum: Adding more instruction on effective digital communications and fundraising (e.g. social media and crowd-funding), and on donor identification and cultivation, could make the already-strong curriculum on resource development even more powerful.
3. Multiculturalism: ArtsLab is well-positioned and well-equipped to be a leader within the arts sector regionally and nationally on how to deal with culturally complex communities and racialized inequities. ArtsLab's experience, skills and networks give it impressive resources for devising effective learning strategies on this crucial yet difficult and emotionally-charged topic. Model the importance of this topic by deliberately creating spaces where respectful explorations of difference and inequity can occur.
4. Guidelines for recruitment: Continue to hone existing eligibility, seeking organizations that (a) can field a team highly committed to working through this strenuous process over the full timeline; and (b) have a healthy combination of organizational stability and specific developmental goals. Continue to focus eligibility on small to midsized organizations, and younger organizations, which are likely to get more benefit from this than are larger, more experienced organizations.



TOUCHSTONE CENTER FOR COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY
360 Brunswick Avenue South, Minneapolis MN 55416 612-232-2912
www.touchstone-center.com