

Chapter 7

Arts Partnerships Are Bridging Disparities: Cross-Sector Partnerships Are Giving Disadvantaged Youth Access to Successful Careers in the Arts

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ABSTRACT

Government, non-profit and industry partnerships are giving disadvantaged youth access to successful careers in the Arts. Although the trend has been toward an ever growing “opportunity gap” between children from low socio-economic communities and their wealthier peers, cross-sector arts education partnerships are bridging disparities in access to the creative professions. Currently, the lack of opportunity for young people from poverty disproportionately affects their career prospects in the Arts, where consistent exposure to the tools and techniques of the creative disciplines is necessary in order to guide students toward college and/or careers in these growing fields. Despite a burgeoning creative economy, remarkably little progress has been made to diversify the workforce in this sector. Collectively, we’ve underestimated how creating opportunities for young people is economically valuable to government, non-profit and industry. A fundamentally different framework is needed that puts a proper valuation on the future of our youth.

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BACKGROUND

The Growing Creative Economy

Good news. The economy is growing. And growing faster than any other sector is the Arts & Creative industries. Soon, creative jobs will out-number jobs in all of manufacturing (Florida, 2006). Already, according to a study by Richard Florida, “more than 40 million Americans work in the creative sector, which has grown by 20 million jobs since the 1980 and accounts for nearly half of all wages and salaries paid in the U.S.” (Florida, 2006)

More good news. Digging deeper, we can break it down to understand the growth of this field at a local level. For example, fashion design, landscape design and architecture had a more than 20 percent growth in the number of New York City firms since 2003- with the fields of interior design, industrial design, and graphic design close behind (Giles & Wang, 2014). Film and Media is also booming, with the number of TV series produced in 2014 in NYC almost doubling since 2011, and the number of films up 70% from 188 to 267 in the same period (Soucca, 2013).

The same industries are growing across the nation. “Between 2012 and 2022, the U.S. will add 15.6 million new jobs,” Florida writes. “Of these, 5.6 million will be high-wage, creative class positions- including arts, media and entertainment. The creative class will grow by 12.5 percent, more than either the working class or service class industries.” (Florida, 2014).

Young people need the experiences and knowledge necessary to participate in the creative fields as much as they need science and math skills to compete in STEM professions. Yet school curricula, testing standards, and most of the non-profit dollars targeted at underserved communities are not addressing the shifting landscape. The “Arts” are still effectively being put in a box, less associated with global competitiveness and economic opportunity than the evidence implies they deserve to be. And what’s more, the “Arts” are a public “nice-to-have,” whose funding is always fragile in the face of budget pressures, shifts in policy, and partisan divides.

Cross-sector partnerships will be the key to funding and implementing successful large scale programs that give young people, especially those living below the poverty line, the opportunity to develop core creative knowledge skills. But more than that, these partnerships will do more than provide access, they will bridge the gap between school and career – effectively closing the opportunity gap that right now stands poised to widen.

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