

Chapter 27

The Role of Collaboration to Encourage Civic Engagement Through the Arts: The Blurring of the Government and Nonprofit Sectors

Tina Dippert

Portland State University, USA

Erna Gelles

Portland State University, USA

Meg Merrick

Portland State University, USA

ABSTRACT

Historically governments have used art's universal language to achieve various goals, including political engagement through cultural enrichment. Employing nonprofit/public sector relationships for the arts presents myriad governance challenges, but always with the promise of intrinsic and extrinsic benefits. This chapter presents two cases to illustrate such collaborative relationships. Applying various nonprofit theories, stakeholder discussions and Sherry R. Arnstein's still relevant community engagement work to explore relationships between sectors in arts funding, the first involves the passage of a local tax to provide funding for arts education and arts organizations. The second illustrates an instrumental relationship between a local government and nonprofit to provide art programs to promote tolerance in an increasingly diverse community. Both cases present imperfect policies, but represent the continuation of an ancient practice wherein the arts are being used for more than arts' sake, but to serve a multitude of non-arts instrumental societal functions.

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INTRODUCTION

The arts are a universal language that nonprofits, government, and for-profits have employed, intentionally or not, throughout history to serve the public and promote civic engagement. Relationships among these sectors, with regard to the arts, continue to hold sway and influence society in countless ways. The extent to which these relationships support and encourage creativity has varied over the centuries, as have definitions of art itself. There is however ample evidence that in contemporary times the relationship between governments and nonprofit arts organizations offer extensive reciprocal benefits to local communities, their citizens, the arts establishment, and even government at multiple levels.

Broadly defined, the arts promote interaction with their compelling illustrations, tactile, visual, and performing, and thus serve as a powerful tool for public engagement, political and social through the three economic sectors as well as civil society in general. Since ancient times the arts have been employed by rulers as instruments to frame public perception of governmental legitimacy, and on many occasions have been used even to encourage a call to arms in support of the state. Regardless of goals, the arts have always been able, when access exists, to encourage public engagement in the broader civil society. In contemporary times, this can be through philanthropically or more direct publically supported venues to house productions that simultaneously awaken passions (as one local Opera company's publicity document states, "Nights of passion; no regrets in the morning") while serving social ends (Hansberry, 2000, p. 16). This can take myriad forms that through governmental support encourage the arts or, even arguably, through for-profit design studios or advertising campaigns exemplified in the Clio Awards. The arts, serving societal needs and encouraging dreams, are truly everywhere.

This chapter looks at how partnerships or formal collaborations, especially between the government and nonprofit sectors, exist today much as they have existed throughout time to promote the engagement and education of publics in diverse communities. These partnerships serve instrumental needs, despite the fact that the definition of art itself remains open to debate. Whether the intrinsic value of art for art's sake is the intent of arts policy, or art and arts programs are justified and supported as efficient instruments for direct public benefit (promoting civic calm, engagement and inclusion in more and more diverse communities), distinctions are not easily untangled. How one measures intrinsic value, passion, perception, or dedication to a creative endeavor is unclear. When access is assured to all communities, regardless of barriers, there is a growing body of empirical evidence that society benefits and values the arts. This is evidenced by regional support for arts districts and tax expenditures, often endorsed through public referenda (McCarthy, Ondaatje, Zakaras & Brooks, 2004; Hansberry, 2000).

Yet expenditures are not without expectations. Funds need to be accounted for, collected and dispersed equitably. And the instrumental benefits of public funding in tight economic times, such as economic development and increased social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995) that can be directly attributed to the arts, needs to be demonstrated to maintain or build the public's commitment of resources (see for example McCarthy et al., 2004; Hansberry, 2000).

To build on this discussion this chapter explores the ways nonprofit and public engagement theories help to explain public policy as it relates to arts funding and public support. Employing concepts that explore these relationships, such as three failures theory, linked to what might be called the heterogeneity model, New Public Management's outcomes approach justifying public spending on arts programs to serve the needs of communities, stakeholder involvement in local funding and distribution decisions, and Sherry Arnstein's seminal work on public participation, this chapter considers civic engagement through the arts. Examples of historical precedent and contemporary civic action provide context to clarify how the government and nonprofits have joined forces to use the arts for interaction and community building.

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