

Experiments in Arts Engagement: Case Studies



Real-world examples and practical tips from
the Exploring Engagement Fund

September 2016

Introduction

Through the Exploring Engagement Fund, The James Irvine Foundation provides risk capital for California arts organizations with innovative ideas and a readiness to take bold steps that will engage new and diverse populations.

Many California arts organizations want their participants and artists to reflect the socioeconomic diversity of the state's population. The Exploring Engagement Fund supports new approaches that these nonprofit organizations are using to reach more diverse participants. Through project experiments, Irvine and its grantees are learning valuable lessons about what it takes to engage diverse participants and the types of changes needed to do this work.

This report, by Harder+Company Community Research in partnership with strategy consultant Diane Espaldon, provides real-world examples and practical tips that enrich lessons originally identified in the October 2014 publication, "Emerging Lessons and Implications from Exploring Engagement Fund."

Invest Time



True engagement with new and diverse populations takes time, patience, and commitment

- Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Build Trust



Getting to know a community and building trust are vital to planning and implementing arts engagement

- The San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra

Partner Well



Community partners are critical to accessing new and diverse participants

- LA Opera

Relate, Don't Sell



Engaging new and diverse participants requires different marketing and outreach

- Palm Springs International Film Society
- Centro Binacional Para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño/Binational Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous Communities

Go to New Places



Non-arts venues can help reach new and diverse participants, and often bring unique challenges

- Bay Area Video Coalition

Try New Approaches



New methods and styles can reach participants who perceive art as "not for me"

- Street Poets
- 24th Street Theatre

Align Your Team



Engagement calls for diverse capabilities, training, and practices for artists and staff

- Oakland Museum of California

The case studies featured here reflect the experience of the pool of Exploring Engagement Fund grantees and involve a range of grantees by size, discipline, and geography. Their projects specifically focus on engaging participants from communities of color and low-income groups — two populations of particular interest to the Foundation because they are often underrepresented among nonprofit arts participants. The case studies were informed by interviews with the grantees and review of their grant reports. Irvine and the consulting team greatly appreciate the grantees' willingness to be featured and to share their learning with other arts organizations across California and with the arts field overall.

About Irvine's Arts Engagement Initiative

The Exploring Engagement Fund advances The James Irvine Foundation's goal to promote engagement in the arts for all Californians. The Foundation has three priorities for achieving this goal.

- **Strengthening:** Help arts organizations adapt to change by moving engagement to the core of who they are and what they do.
- **Piloting:** Provide risk capital to test new ways of engaging audiences and participants, and to encourage experimentation and innovation across the field.
- **Field-Building:** Develop a field of leaders and organizations working together to expand engagement so the arts — and arts organizations — are indispensable in people's lives.

The Exploring Engagement Fund is the primary vehicle for advancing the "Piloting" priority of the Irvine Arts Engagement strategy.

Exploring Engagement Fund Scope and Timing

From 2012-2016, Irvine made 119 Exploring Engagement Fund grants across California for a total investment of \$20,618,000. A final cohort of Exploring Engagement Fund grantees was announced in summer 2016.

Grantees that completed their grant-funded projects as of December 2015 conducted a total of 3,670 events, ranging from one to 293 events per organization. A total of 826,978 people participated in these events. In line with the intent of the Exploring Engagement Fund, these organizations reported reaching low-income and ethnically diverse participants. The majority of events, 65 percent, were attended primarily by communities of color (meaning 70 to 100 percent of total event participants were non-White); while 47 percent were attended primarily by low-income participants.

Invest Time



Lesson: True engagement with new and diverse populations takes time, patience, and commitment

In Practice

Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Founded in 1993, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts (YBCA) serves as a catalyst for artistic activity in the San Francisco Bay Area. The organization offers a year-round exhibition program, two annual performance series, a year-round film program, and community engagement programming. YBCA's Exploring Engagement Fund project, *In Community*, engaged four distinct Bay Area communities that were not typically involved with YBCA: Filipinos living in San Francisco, Latin Americans living in San Francisco, East Africans living in Oakland, and people under-housed and homeless in San Francisco's Tenderloin neighborhood. YBCA sought to connect meaningfully with those communities through art-making workshops and community-driven artworks. The overall *In Community* project allowed YBCA to test a new approach to convening community members, community organization partners, and individual artists to collectively determine how to meet mutual interests through hands-on art making.

Engagement Challenge

Anticipating that *In Community* would take time to plan, YBCA staff built a full planning year into the project timeline. But as the project progressed, YBCA staff realized that one year was still not enough time to build the needed connections with the community and partners, establish trust, collectively plan the project, and build sustainable relationships. According to one staff member, *"You can't show up in a neighborhood and have short-term relationships. You have to build long-term presence, and it really takes a lot of time to build trust."* YBCA staff made the deeper investment of staff time during the extended planning period, but as a consequence faced difficult questions about how to allocate time and funding for other project and organizational activities.

"You can't show up in a neighborhood and have short-term relationships. You have to build long-term presence, and it really takes a lot of time to build trust."

Staff Member, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Engagement Solutions

YBCA staff highlighted the following lessons related to the importance of investing time for the project.

- **Recognize community differences:** Relationships and trust with some of YBCA's targeted communities took more time to develop than others. YBCA staff developed an individualized approach and timeline for each community and group of participants based on early insights and past work with the communities.
- **Listen to community influencers:** Staff noted the importance of being visible in these communities and participating in community events. In order to do this strategically, they identified and regularly spoke with key community influencers who could share community perspectives and advise which local events and activities to attend.
- **Adjust budget and timeline:** In addition to adding six months to the project timeline, YBCA also adapted its original budget to better align with how the project was evolving. For example, in order to fully support the community partnerships, YBCA reallocated some staff expenses toward its partners and artists. YBCA communicated ongoing updates to Irvine and clearly articulated how the proposed changes would ultimately help the project have more impact for the participants and community.



Photo credit: Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

Practical Tips for Investing Time

Many Exploring Engagement Fund grantees needed more time for planning and implementation than originally anticipated. The following practical tips for managing time are based on their experiences.

Plan a longer timeframe: Establishing new relationships, building trust, trying new approaches, and working in new spaces all require a careful and realistic analysis of how much time is needed. To do that, ask for advice from other organizations that have done similar work and create contingency plans to account for adjustments, delays, and surprises. Some grantees incorporated an initial planning period before finalizing their project approach and remaining timeline.

Anticipate different timelines for different communities and partners: When seeking to engage multiple communities, expect that different relationships will take different amounts of time for development. One partner or community could have previous partnership experience while another may be wary of interacting with an outside organization. Grantees that had previous experience with their project partners often found working with them for this project less time consuming than working with other, new partners. New partners take initial relationship and trust building time.

Consider the implications of time on budget and people: When thinking about how much time a project will take, be sure to consider the related cost and human resources necessary to accomplish each task — as well as the opportunity costs associated with dedicating staff time to this work over other responsibilities. Consider budgeting for additional contractors, artists, and partners to handle specialized roles in coordination with your staff.

Communicate timeline challenges and needed adjustments: The dynamic nature of arts engagement means that plans can change throughout the course of the project. Communicate regularly with partners about potential changes and how to make adjustments collaboratively. Keep funders informed about challenges, timeline issues, and related budget concerns. Consider how timeline and budget concerns will affect the impact of the project on the community and participants.

Build Trust



Lesson: Getting to know the community and building trust are vital to planning and implementing arts engagement

In Practice

The San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra

An orchestra presenting classical music performances for more than 85 years, the San Bernardino Symphony performs both at California Theatre of Performing Arts and school and community venues throughout San Bernardino County. Over time, the Symphony has sought new ways to engage the multicultural and low-income families in the county that typically were not participating in classical music. Through an earlier Irvine grant, the Symphony staff developed new community engagement skills. Subsequently, through the Exploring Engagement Fund, the Symphony developed the *Mosaico Music Festival*, which was presented in less conventional performance venues and featured symphonic performances of a variety of Latin American musical genres as a way to engage Latino participants.

Engagement Challenge

Through earlier work, the Symphony made great strides in understanding the makeup and perspectives of San Bernardino County's large Latino population. In particular, Symphony staff confirmed that the local Latino community often associated classical music with affluent and mostly White audiences. In order to overcome that perception, Symphony staff members knew they needed to build trust with the Latino community in San Bernardino County, learn what interested members of the community, and demonstrate how classical music could honor and integrate Latino heritage.

Engagement Solutions

In order to engage the Latino community in a meaningful way, the Symphony developed structured community conversations with Latino families and members of organizations serving Latino populations in the region. *"We needed to do some investigative work,"* explained one Symphony staff member. *"What would make a symphonic music performance relevant and appealing to this demographic?"* Through seven of these conversations, the Symphony learned about the rich musical programming already happening within the area's Latino community. *"We were surprised at how much is happening in the Latino community that was under our radar,"* said a staff member. Informed by these community perspectives, the Symphony held concerts in new, more accessible venues throughout the county. It also reallocated some project funds to integrate folkloric dancers and singers. Symphony staff members highlighted the following elements as key lessons learned about building trust with the community.

- **Go beyond the usual people and organizations:** Symphony staff members were aware of some Latino leaders and arts organizations in the county, but wanted to engage families and individuals currently not involved with the arts. The staff cultivated a wide range of relationships to do this, including the Mexican Consulate; the Association of Latino Faculty, staff and students at California State University, San Bernardino; service organizations; and parent groups at local schools. They made a point to hear new thoughts and ideas about what could make a classical symphony appealing to a wider range of community members.

"We needed to do some investigative work. What would make a symphonic music performance relevant and appealing to this demographic?"

Staff Member, The San Bernardino Symphony Orchestra

- **Be genuine, not intimidating:** Members of the Symphony staff wanted to make sure that the community input process did not feel intimidating. Working with a consultant, they organized community conversations and provided food and refreshments to help participants feel comfortable. At the beginning of each session, the Symphony explicitly shared its overall intention and the purpose of the community conversations. In addition, trusted leaders from the region's Latino community made welcoming remarks at the start of each session, and sessions were facilitated by a bilingual professor of education from California State University, San Bernardino.
- **Integrate community feedback and ideas:** For the Symphony, the most important part of building trust with the Latino community was integrating community feedback into its programming. In order to be responsive to community interests, the Symphony restructured its project budget and timeline. Staff members believe that the project's success was a direct result of the respect they showed for community input and the integration of community ideas into the programming.



Photo credit: Steve Brown

Practical Tips for Building Trust

Exploring Engagement Fund projects needed to build trust and relationships with the community and program participants in order to make their projects succeed. Following are practical tips for how to build and sustain trust with community partners.

Understand how your organization is perceived: Many Exploring Engagement Fund grantees realized their initial challenge to building trust was their past relationship with the community. Ask people in the community about their experiences with your organization, and begin addressing any negative perceptions before your project starts. For some organizations, this can be a first step in repairing damaged relationships. It also can help organizations identify and correct any past miscommunications.

Learn about the community: Organizations cannot assume they know what the community wants or needs. Instead, ask members of the community directly about their interests. Many Exploring Engagement Fund grantees connected with local leaders in the government and nonprofit sectors to learn about a community and its needs, interests, existing events and activities, and partnership opportunities. Some grantees added new staff, partners, and artists from the communities of interest. Several grantees also hosted listening series or other direct community learning activities before beginning their projects.

Provide meaningful ways for people and partners to participate: Successful engagement efforts provide opportunities for community members to co-create and collaborate on a project. While some project elements may be in place already, identify ways that community members and partners can genuinely help shape and be a part of the project. Some grantees did this through establishing community advisory groups. Others regularly asked for ideas and perspectives from community members and partners and then actively incorporated them into the project.

Follow through on promises: Carefully consider any promises being made, and only make promises that can be kept. Since Exploring Engagement Fund grants are one-time by design, many grantees faced a challenge about what they could realistically commit to. Consider mutually beneficial ways that partnerships in the community can be maintained beyond a project's grant time period. For example, some grantees wove aspects of their project activities into other programs and actively maintained their relationships with project partners and specific participants.

Partner Well



Lesson: Community partners are critical to accessing new and diverse participants

In Practice

LA Opera

Founded in 1986, LA Opera is one of the four largest opera companies in the United States. Since its inception, the Opera has had a mandate to bring the power and beauty of opera to students, teachers, children, adults, and senior citizens who do not typically have access to this art form. The Opera accomplishes this through educational programs and performances with schools and community organizations. For its Exploring Engagement Fund project, the Opera sought to create a tradition of opera in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of East Los Angeles, a diverse community that is home to a majority of low-income residents. To implement its project, LA Opera closely collaborated with several Boyle Heights organizations, including the Mariachi Conservatory and White Memorial Medical Center. Together with its partners, the Opera helped develop, train, and nurture community choirs with participants spanning from teenagers to senior citizens and family groups.

Engagement Challenge

While it has a long tradition of community programming, LA Opera had not previously created multiple long-term community member choirs or engaged with Boyle Heights community members and organizations. For this project, each of the Opera's new community partners served different populations and had very different organizational structures. The Mariachi Conservatory is a small organization, founded by a neighborhood music teacher, that provides music education to people of all ages. White Memorial Medical Center, meanwhile, is a large medical center that offers a range of inpatient, outpatient, emergency, and diagnostic services. The Opera partnered with its chaplain department. The Opera needed to approach each partnership differently in order to ensure a successful engagement effort.

"We want our patients to experience beauty, harmony and inspiration in their care... We believe that addressing these elements of our patients' experience could enhance their treatment and improve the quality of their lives."

Program Partner, White Memorial Medical Center

Engagement Solutions

Based on their partnership experience, staff members of LA Opera, the Mariachi Conservatory, and White Memorial Medical Center highlighted the following key lessons.

- **Partner with organizations with shared values:** The LA Opera and its partners shared a belief in the role of music in healing and uplifting the community. For instance, a doctor from the White Memorial Medical Center reached out to the Opera through a letter that described the medical center's vision for how music could contribute to a healing environment: "We want our patients to experience beauty, harmony and inspiration in their care. Would it be possible for the LA Opera to help us bring the beauty of music, of the human voice, and of poetry to our public spaces? We believe that addressing these elements of our patients' experience could enhance their treatment and improve the quality of their lives."

This letter resonated with Opera staff and connected to their views about the power of music. Mariachi Conservatory staff members also believed from initial conversations that the Opera shared their commitment to music education that engages the whole person, including social and emotional well-being.

- **Ensure mutual buy-in and readiness:** Opera staff stressed that both the Opera and its partners had to be fully committed and ready for the project and the related collaboration. The Opera ensured that its senior leadership and board were aware and supportive of the project. Staff also asked partners to show their commitment by contributing staff time, space, and other resources such as joint publicity. Because those supports were also vital to project implementation, the Opera saw such commitments as an early sign that a partner was ready for the collaboration.
- **Develop the approach collaboratively and with humility:** The Opera staff first met with each partner to share the preliminary project idea, hear the partner's ideas, and refine the approach and logistics together. Both partners described how they regularly shared new project ideas with the Opera, and that the Opera would willingly implement these ideas. Opera staff shared that they approached each partnership with humility and great appreciation. One staff member said, *"We were honored to be in the hospital... I think sometimes the rap on our art form is that we are somehow elitist... [but we were] thrilled to come into somebody else's 'home.'"*
- **Involve artists that support the partnership:** The Opera's teaching artists had the abilities, dispositions, and understanding to successfully work with each partner and the partner's participants. The same teaching artists were involved throughout the lifespan of the project, which helped the partners' staff feel comfortable and confident. The teaching artists embodied the shared values and intent of the project, which centered on music as healing.



Photo credit: LA Opera

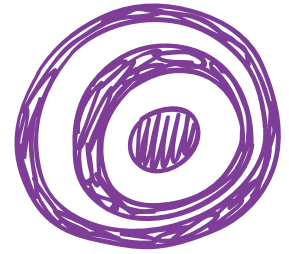
Practical Tips for Partnering Well

Many Exploring Engagement Fund grantees established and/or maintained community partnerships for their projects. Below are practical tips for how to create effective community partnerships when planning and implementing arts engagement projects.

Select partners thoughtfully: Community partnerships should focus on identifying partners with shared values, gauging a partner's interest in the project, understanding the partner's readiness to collaborate, and learning about the organization's past partnership experiences. Grantees that had the most successful partnerships had in-depth conversations with their partners before the project began. Some grantees created written agreements with partners to confirm shared expectations and commitment of all parties, while other grantees had informal verbal agreements. Either way, it is important to clarify the role each party will play.

Work collaboratively: Grantees with the most successful partnerships collaboratively planned and implemented their projects. This helped the grantee organization truly understand and meet the interests of the targeted participants, about whom the partner typically brought deep knowledge and access. The partnership must be meaningful and beneficial for both organizations. This requires staff in both organizations to be truly open to their partners' ideas and perspective. Collaborative partnerships should be supported by regular and ongoing communication to manage logistics and sort through successes and challenges. Some grantees had partnership meetings once or twice a month to address this need.

Relate, Don't Sell



Lesson: Engaging new and diverse participants requires different marketing and outreach

In Practice

Palm Springs International Film Society

The Palm Springs International Film Society (PSIFS) hosts two international film festivals annually that draw audiences, filmmakers, and industry professionals from around the globe. PSIFS also hosts enriching year-round free programming for the community and offers film-based learning opportunities for local students through its educational outreach programs. For its Exploring Engagement Fund project, PSIFS wanted to engage people living in the surrounding areas of Riverside and San Bernardino counties who are typically underrepresented at its film festivals. In order to do this, PSIFS created *One World*, a traveling program of multicultural, multiethnic short films with universally relatable themes. Post screening discussions focused on what people have in common in an effort to promote cross-cultural awareness and acceptance. *One World* traveled to 18 communities throughout the region.

Engagement Challenge

PSIFS had never before presented a mobile film festival or created programming for the diverse communities in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Further, while PSIFS has a highly identifiable brand name in Palm Springs and the Coachella Valley, in launching *One World*, staff quickly learned that many people in the surrounding communities had never heard of the organization. Additionally, most of the target participants had never experienced short films. Staff knew that partnering with influential community members and institutions would be an important way to reach potential participants. PSIFS did not have local champions in 17 of the 18 communities it wished to engage, however, and had to find ways to make those connections in the hope that, over time, people who directly participated would also help spread the word about *One World*.

"We didn't want to be top-down or condescending. People let their guard down when they are not being preached to."

Staff Member, Palm Springs International Film Society

Engagement Solutions

PSIFS used a variety of approaches — many of which were different from its typical marketing activities — to understand and engage each targeted community. Staff members started with online research that helped them identify and prioritize specific people and groups to engage. They then cold-called or emailed decision makers at local chambers of commerce, libraries, and major cultural institutions or groups. Staff scheduled meetings with community leaders and shared detailed information about *One World*.

The community research and engagement process fueled PSIFS's ability to bring short films to new audiences and participants. In addition, PSIFS emphasized the importance of asking questions and integrating local culture into their film screening events. In the end, more people learned about and participated in *One World* as a result of these various strategies. Staff highlighted the following key lessons.

- **Connect with local leaders and decision makers:** PSIFS found that reaching out to marketing and membership directors at local museums, head librarians, activities coordinators at community centers, and student groups on local college and university campuses was a great way to build interest and identify local champions. It also enabled PSIFS to tailor its approach to programming for each specific community. Local leaders advised on outreach efforts, connecting PSIFS to blogs, newsletters, and media for broader reach.
- **Be accessible:** In their outreach and at *One World* events, PSIFS staff members took care to avoid jargon or film-insider references and worked to make the art form and their presentations as accessible and compelling as possible — this extended to explaining short films and contextualizing the presentation.
- **Ask for feedback:** At the conclusion of each event, PSIFS asked participants for their comments and reactions. In the words of one staff member, *"We didn't want [the events] to be top-down or condescending. How can we do a screening better? Did it change views or make you feel or think differently? [...] People let their guard down when they are not being preached to."* Staff found that providing opportunities for participants to give feedback, such as in a survey or a post-screening discussion, helped promote genuine engagement. PSIFS also used that feedback to refine the *One World* events over time.
- **Be flexible with location and build on other local events:** When securing locations for *One World* presentations, PSIFS was very willing to go to alternative spaces and partner with other local events in the community. In one town, the organization hosted the films after a popular chili cook-off. Staff felt this increased participant engagement since it was something new within a very comfortable and familiar event.



Photo credit: Palm Springs International Film Society

Centro Binacional Para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño/Binational Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous Communities

Located in Fresno, Centro Binacional Para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño (CBDIO) offers a wide range of leadership, language, health, and arts programs for Southern Mexico natives currently living in Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Fresno, Madera, and Monterey counties. For its Exploring Engagement Fund project, CBDIO wanted to increase opportunities for artistic expression among low-income, indigenous Oaxacans living in the San Joaquin Valley. CBDIO offered people the opportunity to participate in an indigenous dance workshop series and a workshop on song/poetry/story writing in Mixteco (an indigenous language spoken by some natives of Oaxaca, Mexico), with the opportunity to participate in the annual *Guelaguetza California* festival.

Engagement Challenge

CBDIO first reached out to supportive local indigenous leaders to inform them about the new workshops, and shared information about the opportunity through bilingual outreach via radio, television, community events, and direct calls to the organization's network of local contacts. While some people expressed interest, CBDIO staff noticed that many potential participants shared two reservations about joining the workshops: 1) the Mixteco language being taught in the workshops was a different dialect than they spoke, and 2) some immigrant parents wanted their children to focus on mastery of English first. One CBDIO staff member observed, *"It was harder to really catch the attention of the community, because even in Mexico our language is not valued. [...] Everyone wants to get rid of it, learn English and believe it's even better for children to go straight to English and not necessarily retain this part of our identity."*

"We just say, 'This is part of our community. This is our tradition. This is the clothing that we wear and this is the music that we listen to. We play. We dance. We share the food.' That type of discussion is what takes place, and not necessarily, 'Let's do art.'"

Staff Member, Centro Binacional Para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño

Engagement Solutions

CBDIO staff members realized that to engage participants, the language and cultural expression workshops needed to be relevant to participants' current lives. They highlighted the following key lessons.

- **Adjust approach by participant group:** CBDIO learned that many of the adults were engaged in traditional Chilena music (played by violins and acoustic guitars at important celebrations), leading the instructor to integrate Chilena songs into the adult Mixteco workshops. The organization tailored youth workshops to also blend in hip hop and rap music, and current issues of social and cultural interest.
- **Promote the diverse benefits of the program:** CBDIO emphasized that participants would learn Mixteco artistic expression and language while also practicing public speaking and advocacy, which were skills that interested the community.

To help overcome wariness in the community about spending time on Mixteco instead of English, staff featured participants' own Mixteco music and poetry at public events to help community members see the importance of their artistic and cultural expressions. CBDIO staff reported that Oaxacan immigrants and their families were able to relate to their indigenous language by connecting it to their current lives and a shared community heritage. A staff member stated, *"We just say, 'You know what? This is part of our community. This is our tradition. This is the clothing that we wear and this is the music that we listen to. We play. We dance. We share the food.' That type of discussion is what takes place, and not necessarily, 'You know what? Let's do art.'"*



Photo credit: Miguel Villegas/CBDIO

Practical Tips for Relating, Not Selling

Most Exploring Engagement Fund grantees needed to adapt their outreach approaches in order to genuinely relate to participants. Below are practical tips for how to relate to diverse communities when planning and implementing arts engagement projects.

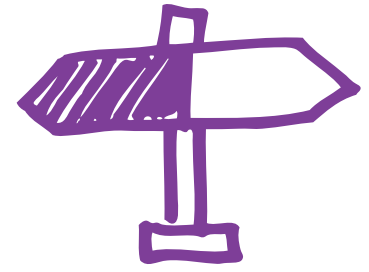
Connect with local champions: Local champions can help provide advice on programming and grassroots marketing approaches and introduce organizations to potential partners and spaces. They are also vital to building initial word-of-mouth and enthusiasm about the program. Some grantees began their project by first identifying and getting to know local champions or influencers. They then stayed in close contact with those champions throughout the project seeking their advice along the way.

Reach out to local media and groups that participants trust: In addition to more grassroots and word-of-mouth outreach, through recommendations from local champions, many grantees used local media, email groups, and meetings to promote their programs. Take the time to identify local media and groups that the targeted participants are involved with and trust.

Use community-friendly outreach methods: Grantees experimented with how to make the way they talked about their programs as appealing, accessible, and engaging as possible. Grantees incorporated suggestions from local champions and partners to do this effectively. Be prepared to respond to questions from the community with simple explanations that avoid jargon or insider references.

Include refreshments: Many grantees highlighted the importance of food and drinks at events to help create a comfortable, welcoming community atmosphere and to increase engagement and participation by attendees. Some grantees included food and drinks from popular local vendors, such as a favorite local bakery, as another way to relate to the community.

Go to New Places



Lesson: Non-arts venues can help reach new and diverse participants, and often bring unique challenges

In Practice

Bay Area Video Coalition

Celebrating its 40th anniversary in 2016, Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC) has a legacy of inspiring social change by empowering media makers to develop and share diverse stories through art, education, and technology. BAVC programs bring together a multi-generational mix of artists, experienced media professionals, educators, low-income youth and adults, and industry partners in this pursuit. Using a newly developed mobile storytelling lab which included laptops and cameras, BAVC's Exploring Engagement Fund project offered workshops to people engaged with three social service agency partners: Homeless Prenatal Program, Recovery Survival Network, and the Veterans Affairs Psychosocial Rehabilitation and Recovery Program. The videos created as part of the project were shared with the partners, on public access television, and online.

Engagement Challenge

BAVC's Exploring Engagement Fund project brought its storytelling workshops into locations that were new to the organization. Typically BAVC's programs are held at its San Francisco facility or in community libraries that have the equipment and space needed for its programs. In contrast, this project brought BAVC workshops to a nearby prenatal care center, two local county jails, and a veterans service organization. For each workshop, BAVC staff had to transport and set up the organization's mobile storytelling lab. Each partner's space had different equipment needs and location constraints to be considered. As one BAVC staff member noted, *"Inside the jail, there's very strict enforcement of what we could bring in, what type of materials could be used. We were really limited in the sense of what we might traditionally use. We had to be very flexible and adapt."*

"I have been incarcerated at the San Francisco County Jail for over a year and a half. For the first time I had something to look forward to doing. I am amazed at how much [the instructors] have taught us in such a short time frame."

Program Participant, Bay Area Video Coalition

Engagement Solutions

BAVC took a collaborative approach with each of its partners and worked creatively within significant space limitations. Staff highlighted the following key lessons about going to new places:

- **Learn how partners use their spaces:** Early in their project planning, BAVC staff had in-depth conversations with their partners about how people used the partners' spaces. Staff got to know the partners and their spaces very well before beginning the programming.
- **Improve use of space over multiple interactions:** Staff highlighted the benefit of conducting a series of workshops versus having a one-time event. With a series of activities, staff got to know the participants and had the opportunity to adjust their approach to address space challenges over time.

- Consider constraints as opportunities:** While each new space had certain limitations for artistic programming, these constraints also provided creative opportunities. For example, a BAVC staff member shared these observations about holding workshops at the jail: *“Personal objects are usually part of one of the early writing prompts that we use. [The incarcerated individuals] weren’t allowed to bring in any type of personal objects... The only things that we could film were literally inside the pods or in the classrooms that we were in. It was pretty limiting there... [but] it also fostered collaboration within the classroom. You would have somebody that might be into drawing. He would end up writing a title page for everybody or animating some of their stories. You might have somebody that was a beatboxer and be able to make creating rhythms for other people’s stories.”*



Photo credit: Bay Area Video Coalition

Practical Tips for Going to New Places

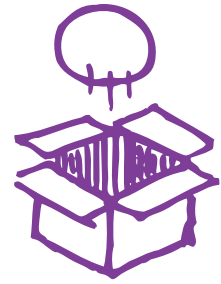
Exploring Engagement Fund grantees often left their typical venues to go into community public spaces or non-arts spaces in order to meet their intended participants. Below are practical tips for going to new places when planning and implementing arts engagement projects.

Identify shared values to help mitigate space challenges: Exploring Engagement Fund grantees typically had more success working in non-arts settings if they selected spaces where the partners there saw the relationship as mutually beneficial and shared the belief in the purpose of their project. Initial “getting to know you” conversations with the partners in potential spaces can help your organization determine if the collaboration will be a good fit. Having shared belief in the purpose of the project also facilitates effective responses to the inevitable challenges of working in an unfamiliar location.

Understand each space’s assets and what you need from the arrangement: Organizations should consider how a space provides access to targeted participants and whether it meets the program’s artistic, structural, or location needs — as well as how any gaps or limitations can be mitigated. Other considerations include how the project might benefit the space and what staff at the new space may want out of this relationship. Grantees that thought carefully through those aspects had a more positive experience within the non-arts space. Others that had more challenges ultimately made the space work but only after a lot of frustration, staff time, and sometimes unanticipated expenses.

Consider space logistics and constraints: Working in new or non-traditional spaces can bring new logistic challenges. For example, many Exploring Engagement Fund grantees faced new challenges working in buildings or public spaces with multiple entrances and exits. Others faced security concerns. Anticipate potential challenges and ask advice from others who have done similar work or worked in similar spaces. Remember that space challenges may also have time and budget implications.

Try New Approaches



Lesson: New methods and styles can reach participants who perceive art as “not for me”

In Practice

Street Poets

Based in Los Angeles, Street Poets brings poetry and music programs for at-risk youth to local schools and juvenile probation centers. The organization’s mission is to help people discover their authentic voices, empower them to transcend self-destructive lifestyles, and build peace and community change through poetry, music, and healing workshops. For its Exploring Engagement Fund project, Street Poets sought to reach beyond the youth it usually serves to engage a broader range of ages and multi-ethnic participants. In order to work with people they had never worked with before, Street Poets staff members felt they needed to meet these new participants in their own communities. Their *Poetry in Motion Van*, a mobile performance venue and recording studio, allowed Street Poets to bring poetry workshops and performances to low-income and underserved communities across Los Angeles County.

Engagement Challenge

Using a van to conduct programming was a new approach for Street Poets. Early in the project, the team parked in different neighborhoods hoping that the van, with its bright and colorful images, would naturally draw people. At some locations they drew a small crowd who wanted to check out the van. However, staff noticed participants were often shy and did not want to try poetry. Street Poets needed to attract more people for longer periods of time and concluded that the organization needed to make approaching the van and poetry itself less intimidating.

Engagement Solutions

Street Poets adjusted its program approach, resulting in greater engagement and achievement of its project goals to connect with people in Los Angeles neighborhoods, such as Watts Willowbrook. Staff highlighted the following key lessons.

- **Demonstrate the art form to make it inviting:** Staff members realized they had to do the art themselves to make it more comfortable and inviting for other participants. When the van arrived at a new location, staff immediately started sharing poetry and music in order to get people’s attention and model this engagement. In other words, staff had to “start the party” and bring the energy and excitement to draw people to the van.
- **Join community events:** While some pop-up or spontaneous locations (e.g., in front of coffee shops) had limited success, Street Poets learned it was more effective to partner with existing park programs, neighborhood events, cultural festivals, and other settings where people were already gathering. This was especially important in neighborhoods with public safety issues. Street Poets partnered with several community events, such as the City of Los Angeles’ Summer Night Lights, to bring the van to numerous settings over the course of its two-year project. A staff member expressed the intent in this way: *“From the very beginning, we wanted our van [...] to have that kind of a presence where it’s like when you see the van, instead of feeling fear or some trepidation or some concern... there is a sense of joy and it puts smiles on people’s faces.”*

“When the Street Poets pulled up in the van, our vision of turning the abandoned library into a positive youth space became a reality. The Street Poets created a creative and safe space for everyone to share their passions, pains, and hopes.”

*Program Partner,
Violence Prevention Coalition*

- **Incorporate multiple ways for people to engage:** Staff members drew from their experiences working with different types of learners and added various forms of art to the van's programming. People could sing, record music, dance, recite and create poetry, or write their thoughts about topics like community challenges or their dreams. According to one staff member, *"Usually it's the little kids that check out the van first... So we use the music and the dancing as a way to engage them, and then gradually some of the elders in the community would come around... the young adults would be the last wave."* Staff also purposely incorporated different types of activities that varied in intensity and time commitment, with highly accessible options, such as using a white board to encourage group poetry writing.
- **Use music and dance to offer a break from intense experiences:** The use of music and dancing acted as a way to transition from more intense stories and moments that may have emerged during other activities. A staff member observed, *"Dancing was a really good way of shake off and balance the deeper stories... As you listen to a really heavy story for instance, or a really heavy poem, or something that's really intimate and personal, it really helps them to be able to go from that."*



Photo credit: Street Poets

24th Street Theatre

The mission of 24th Street Theatre is to engage, educate, and provoke young and underserved audiences with world-class theater and arts education. Located in the largely Hispanic immigrant community of University Park near downtown Los Angeles, 24th Street Theatre creates productions with professional artists. It also provides after-school programming for elementary schools, a teen leadership academy, and professional development for teaching artists. With its Exploring Engagement Fund grant, 24th Street Theatre created the *Teatro del Pueblo* project to develop and perform two plays with local community members. Participants co-created the project by sharing examples of extreme adversity from their lives in "story circles." A professional playwright then worked with the community members to weave these stories into a play. Over six months, the community members were closely involved in all aspects of the play, including acting in the performances.

Engagement Challenge

Working with low-income adults who were not professional theater artists and co-creating a play was new for 24th Street Theatre. Most of the participants in the *Teatro del Pueblo* project were low-income, including some who were homeless. Staff found that potential participants were curious about how they could be involved with the project but were unsure about committing to this intensive and longer-term work. The unpredictable work schedules and multiple caretaking duties of some participants often created challenges for the program. The "story circles" also brought up intense emotions for some of the participants who shared difficult stories about immigration, loss, and violence. Staff members also struggled with how to balance their artistic expectations for this project compared to expectations for their other productions with professional actors.

"I thought they had achieved a very unique balance blending the professional actors with the members of the community and their stories. It was a great experience in art, team work, and community. I feel like I grew as an actor and story teller, but above all as a human being."

*Program Participant,
24th Street Theatre*

Engagement Solutions

The 24th Street Theatre staff members recognized that to engage low-income adults in this time-intensive creative process, they would need to address some barriers to participation and make participation safe and welcoming for all. Staff highlighted the following key lessons.

- **Create a supportive environment:** As part of the “story circles,” people shared deeply emotional experiences such as the death of children, rape, and difficult immigration experiences. Staff and participants co-created group norms to ensure that the activities were a “safe space” to explore such topics. Staff also provided food at all project activities, and the first 30 minutes of all activities were dedicated to eating and socializing together. Starting midway through the project and continuing today, project participants socialize regularly outside of the project.
- **Anticipate barriers to active participation:** Participants had many competing demands for their time, including childcare challenges. To address this, staff consistently reminded participants about upcoming activities and called people if they were late or not present. Staff also communicated to participants how important everyone was to the process.
- **Adjust artistic expectations:** In order to manage their own expectations for the artistic quality of this project compared to professional productions, staff members offered intensive acting workshops in the second year to participants to build their acting and performance skills. 24th Street Theatre also carefully positioned the culminating performances as a community play with free attendance. In external communications they highlighted the process of creating the production because, unlike other productions by the theater, the process was more important than the product.



Photo credit: Cindy Marie Jenkins

Practical Tips for Trying New Approaches

Many Exploring Engagement Fund grantees tried new approaches to reach new and diverse participants, which led to new challenges and opportunities for creative problem-solving. Below are key considerations for trying new approaches to arts engagement.

Incorporate something familiar to draw people in: Many grantees realized that they often had to start by shifting people’s perceptions of a specific art form or art in general. Some grantees were able to soften perceived barriers among participants by incorporating familiar elements such as a specific type of music. Project partners also sometimes served as that familiar element. Talk with community members and partners to learn more about what may be appealing to potential participants as an engagement gateway.

Provide different ways for people to engage: Many grantees incorporated multiple ways for people to engage with their projects and art. Grantees found success targeting different activities and art forms to different participant groups and ages. For example, children and teenagers typically have different interests than older adults. Grantees worked closely with community partners to decide on specific project approaches, and they refined their approach throughout the project in response to participant feedback and interest.

Create a safe environment: Many grantees had projects that encouraged people to share personal stories. These grantees began by building relationships with the participants and creating a safe environment for people to share deeply personal, often traumatic experiences. Staff or partners actively facilitated these sessions, with some organizations even training their staff on facilitation techniques. Incorporating food and social time also helped create a supportive, welcoming environment for participants. Some grantees also closely involved the project partners to help create a safe environment for participants. The project partners often had existing relationships with the people and offered additional expertise such as mental health or case management training. Many of these partners could provide continued support after the project activities were over.

Align Your Team

Lesson: Engagement calls for diverse capabilities, training, and practices for artists and staff



In Practice

Oakland Museum of California

The mission of Oakland Museum of California (OMCA) is to inspire all Californians to create a more vibrant future for themselves and their communities. The organization's collections and programs explore and reveal the factors that shape California character and identity, from its natural landscapes, to successive waves of migration, to its culture of creativity and innovation. OMCA's Exploring Engagement Fund project focused on extending the museum's presence in neighboring communities through approaches that included deepening partnerships with three community organizations: Oakland Asian Cultural Alliance, Eastside Arts Alliance, and YMCA of the East Bay. OMCA brought its mobile museum, the "Oakland Rover," into accessible public spaces in different Oakland neighborhoods as a participatory art-making platform. As part of the project, community members and lead artists also created two large-scale participatory mural projects that were exhibited on the outside walls of the museum to reflect both personal and cultural identity and the evolving story of California.

Engagement Challenge

In order to position the museum as a meaningful and relevant resource for diverse Oakland neighborhoods, OMCA knew its staff needed to be more outward-facing and community-focused. OMCA wanted this shift to occur across all staff, instead of having engagement activities narrowly siloed in certain roles or departments. OMCA pursued this realignment in part by contracting with LeaderSpring, an organization that provides social justice-oriented leadership programs, to deliver professional development support to staff. An initial small cohort of staff members and partners met over five months to discuss, learn, and practice skills related to community-building and diversity. Through this cohort training, staff members carefully considered and reflected on the terminology, definitions, and approaches they needed to work more collaboratively with the community as part of their Exploring Engagement Fund project. The work was designed so that the initial cohort would spread the new outward-facing approach across the museum staff and would continue with future cohort trainings.

"People really have to understand clearly what the goal is, what impact the organization is trying to have on the community, for the community, with the community, and be able to tie their own work... to that broader meaning."

Staff Member, Oakland Museum of California

Engagement Solutions

OMCA hired an outside expert to facilitate and support its shift to be more engaged with the community. OMCA highlighted the following key elements and lessons related to aligning its team.

- **Align your team over time:** The cohort training process took place over a period of months, allowing sufficient time to build new skills and awareness among staff to avoid rushing or forcing the transformation. According to one staff member, *"When you do try to force it... there comes a moment where people feel that they don't have a choice in the alignment, that somebody other than the person sitting or working with them, or their teammate, is asking them to do something they may or may not feel comfortable with. [We were] trying to make sure we didn't go there, but instead went to true team-building through alignment."* People also needed time to reflect on the training and discussions before they could try something new. Therefore, the training took longer than originally expected and staff alignment is still evolving for OMCA.

- Understand the importance of terminology and communication:** OMCA learned about the importance of developing shared definitions for how museum staff members talk among one another about engagement and the community, as well as how the organization communicates externally. A staff member noted, *“Staff started to realize the importance of not just the words that they were saying, but also how they interacted with communities and that it needed to fundamentally change.”* Developing shared definitions and approaches helped align both staff and partners. It enabled them to create more successful community partnerships and implement the project.



Photo credit: Odell Hussey Photography

- Connect the work to the whole organization:** OMCA staff stressed the importance of team alignment and connection to a deeper shift for the organization and its mission. One staff member observed, *“People really have to understand clearly what the goal is, what impact the organization is trying to have on the community, for the community, with the community, and be able to tie their own work ... to that broader meaning.”* Another staff member noted the importance of engaging the entire staff in such a shift: *“Do not allow your engagement piece to be an island... When you have the support of the entire organization, then you don't have to have your engagement team pleading with your facilities staff to do something, or pleading with the curators, or pleading with collections staff, in order to have something happen.”* Connecting the engagement work to the overall organization helped the project team receive the support needed to implement the project efficiently and effectively.

Practical Tips for Aligning Your Team

The Exploring Engagement Fund grantees undertook a range of formal and informal processes to align their teams. Below are practical tips for alignment to consider when planning and implementing arts engagement projects.

Develop a team approach: Many Exploring Engagement Fund projects used a team or group approach to implement their projects. Some grantees' teams consisted entirely of internal staff, while others included external partners. Some grantees with an internal team purposely involved people from different departments to incorporate different perspectives and build buy-in and commitment across the organization. Actively involving multiple people to plan and implement the project helped distribute the responsibilities of creating a new project and working with new participants. It also brought a variety of skills and perspectives to help address unexpected problems. A team approach requires more coordination and regular group communication to ensure all team members are in sync.

Understand your current team and select additional team members to balance it: Projects that serve new and diverse participants often require different skills than those an organization needs for typical programming. Specifically, Exploring Engagement Fund grantees needed team members with excellent communication and relationship building skills; an openness to new ideas and flexibility in incorporating those ideas into existing plans; strong facilitation, leadership and management skills; commitment to true collaboration with other people and partners; willingness to be patient and vulnerable; tolerance for ambiguity; and the ability to not take anything too personally. It is important to reflect on your current staff's skills and attributes relative to the skills you need to successfully implement your project. For example, working in a new geographic area may require having team members who know that community well, have existing relationships there, and have specific language skills. Many Exploring Engagement Fund projects closely involved community partners, outside contractors, and artists to help by adding new skills and relationships to their project team.

Conduct ongoing team reflection and refinement: Aligning a team is an ongoing process of considering how well the team is working together toward shared goals and opportunities to improve. Consider any needed additions or refinements to your team. Identify areas where team members may have different perspectives and how those differences could be addressed to bring more consistency and alignment for project implementation.

Harder+Company Community Research is a comprehensive social research and planning firm with offices in San Francisco, Davis, San Diego, and Los Angeles, California. Harder+Company's mission is to help our clients achieve social impact through quality research, strategy, and organizational development services. Since 1986, we have assisted nonprofits, foundations, and government agencies throughout California and the country in using good information to make good decisions for their future. Our success rests on providing services that contribute to positive social impact in the lives of vulnerable people and communities.

www.hardenco.com



**The James Irvine
Foundation**

The James Irvine Foundation is a private, nonprofit grantmaking foundation dedicated to expanding opportunity for the people of California to participate in a vibrant, successful, and inclusive society. The Foundation's grantmaking focuses on expanding economic and political opportunity for families and young adults who are working but struggling with poverty. Since 1937, the Foundation has provided over \$1.5 billion in grants to more than 3,600 nonprofit organizations throughout California. With about \$2 billion in assets, the Foundation made grants of \$74 million in 2015 for the people of California.

www.irvine.org