



# getting the right mix

## Sustainability and Resource Development Strategies in Out-of-School Time Youth Arts Programs in Massachusetts

by Christine Proffitt

High-quality youth arts programs that take place outside the formal education system play a vital role in supporting the developmental needs and well-being of today's youth, particularly youth at risk of negative outcomes.

Out-of-school time (OST) youth arts programs provide opportunities for youth to learn about themselves and their world while cultivating skills they may be unable to fully develop at home or at school. Research from the past two decades shows that OST programs provide safe and productive alternatives to the streets, gangs, and jail; bolster academic performance, self-esteem, and community involvement; prevent or minimize adverse risk-taking behaviors; and teach skills essential for the 21st century workforce including creativity, innovation, critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration (Americans for the Arts, 2006; Fiske, 1999; Gargarella, 2007; Heath & Soep, 1998; Heath, Soep, & Roach, 1998; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 2002; Wright, John, Offord, & Rowe, 2004). By extension, these studies point to the importance of funding youth arts programs.

Despite the evidence that the arts support positive youth development, nonprofit arts organizations face, in their never-ending search for funding, a shrinking economy, a continuing decline in philanthropic contributions to the arts, and increased competition to raise funds from the same pool of dwindling resources (Americans for the Arts, 2006; Keating, Pradhan, Wassall, & DeNatale, 2008). It seems surprising, then, that so little attention has been paid to understanding the methods by which OST youth arts programs develop the resources necessary to serve their intended audiences in both the short and long terms.

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**CHICKENS**  
We were studying composition, which is where things are placed in the picture. **OUR WORLD IN PICTURES**

The research reported in this article focuses on understanding the strategies employed by OST youth arts programs in Massachusetts to promote financial sustainability and resource development. Using a comparative case-study methodology, the research team examined a non-random sample of five high-quality OST youth arts programs intended to be reasonably representative of those operating in Massachusetts (see Figure 1). The team identified commonalities, particularities, themes, trends, and variations in the strategies used to fund and sustain these programs. The findings were juxtaposed with state and national expert testimony and compared to the relatively small body of research on best-practice strategies for sustainability and resource development of OST youth programs. The research team hopes that the practices for sustainability and resource development revealed in this study will resonate with OST youth arts programs that are seeking funding and will serve as a resource for youth program developers, administrators, and leaders. This study can also help to guide donors and funders—from foundations and government agencies to businesses and philanthropists—who are looking for ways to support youth arts programming.

### Research Design and Methods

The findings reported here were drawn from 13 categories of data on strategies for sustainability and resource development used by a non-random sample of community-based OST youth arts programs in Massachusetts. The data were collected primarily through in-person interviews with a total of 13 key program staff and organizational leaders from five programs. Additional sources of data included limited on-site observations; follow-up telephone interviews with participants; and a review of related documents, including financial documents, program brochures, and organization websites.

The research team used these data to attempt to answer the following central research questions:

1. What strategies for sustainability and resource development do high-quality OST youth arts programs in Massachusetts employ?
2. To what extent do these programs use best-practice methods of sustainability and resource development, as identified in extant literature?

In order to provide a statewide and national perspective, we also asked related questions of two field experts: H. Mark Smith, YouthReach program manager of the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and Traci Slater-Rigaud, program manager of the Coming Up Taller Awards pro-



### PROGRAM SELECTION CRITERIA

- High-quality youth arts program funded, in part, by the MCC's YouthReach Program
- Operates as an established 501(c)(3) arts and cultural organization in Massachusetts (an out-of-school time environment)
- Program budget less than \$300,000
- Age range of youth served is 12–20 years

**Figure 1. Selected OST youth arts programs in Massachusetts**

gram of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. We asked them about the issues, challenges, and opportunities that nonprofit arts organizations face in maintaining and sustaining their youth programs.

This study examined youth arts programs that function outside the formal school environment and within 501(c)(3) nonprofits that classify themselves as arts and cultural organizations. The criteria for selection focused on the following key program attributes: quality, age range of youth served (primarily teens), geographic location, community context (rural, urban, and suburban), program budget size, creative discipline, years in operation, operating context, and ability to participate. We purposely selected programs outside of Boston due to the dramatic disproportion of funding available in the capital compared to other parts of the state. In addition, all programs selected were funded, in part, by the Massachusetts Cultural Council, a state agency.

In this study, *high quality* is defined according to the standards of the YouthReach program of the Massachusetts Cultural Council (MCC, 2010), as described in its application for funding. Indicators of high-quality programming include strong credentials of instructors and mentors as artists and as educators; such credentials might include graduate degrees or extensive experience as practicing artists. Other indicators are use of high-quality materials and space, youth engagement in creative inquiry, ample opportunity for reflection on process and product, a sequential curriculum that fosters accomplishment and mastery, and opportunities to work toward a culminating event such as

an exhibition or performance (MCC, 2010). The MCC's YouthReach program is a nationally recognized state art agency model program, supported since its inception by the National Endowment for the Arts. Youth arts programs that receive YouthReach funding have met a rigorous standard of excellence, demonstrating high-quality program design, community need and participation, and fiscal management and evaluation. Their funding applications have been vetted by an intensive peer-review process using experts in the field. For all of these reasons, YouthReach funding provided a legitimate and practical criterion for selecting high-quality OST youth arts programs for our study.

### **Effective Strategies for Resource Development and Program Sustainability**

A synthesis of the literature reveals many similarities among best-practice strategies used by OST youth programs of various types. A careful distillation of research, including reports by The Finance Project (Anuskiewicz, Salomon, Schmid, & Torrico, 2008; Deich & Hayes, 2007; Sandel, 2007), the Hamilton Fish Institute and the National Mentoring Center (2007), and the Human Interaction Research Institute (Backer & Barbell, 2006), identifies 13 strategies as the most common and effective best practices used by successful OST youth programs across the country:

- Maximizing public support\*
- Building community support\*
- Cultivating key champions\*
- Creating earned revenue\*
- Maximizing in-kind resources\*
- Demonstrating and communicating results\*
- Building partnerships with the public and private sectors
- Conducting community fundraising to promote individual giving\*
- Advocating for public legislation to create more flexibility in existing funding streams
- Making better use of existing resources
- Diversifying to build capacity\*
- Charging sliding-scale participation fees
- Planning for sustainability and creating a formal plan

The strategies marked with an asterisk are those identified by our 13 participants as being used by this study's sample, in some cases with variations. One additional strategy, hiring and training exceptional staff and mentors, was revealed in study participant interviews as a key practice that contributes to program funding and sustainability. Thus, our study revealed nine strategies

used by the sample Massachusetts OST youth arts programs for resource development and sustainability.

#### **1. Building Community Support**

Developing relationships and a positive public image in the communities that the youth arts programs serve was a recurring theme among study participants. Four of the five programs employed this strategy, recognizing that building relationships with community leaders and other organizations can contribute to developing and maintaining a healthy public image which can, in turn, lead to new sources of financial and non-monetary support.

#### **2. Cultivating and Stewarding Key Program Champions**

Administrators and staff from every program in this study appeared to have actively cultivated and stewarded program champions as part of their funding strategy. Responses from study participants indicated that this strategy helped to attract public attention and led to new funding opportunities. Champions included not only legislators and other influencers outside the organization—business leaders, community leaders, public school system administrators, funders, and donors—but also people within the organization such as the executive director, education director, and program manager, as well as staff, parents or guardians of participating teens, participants, alumni, and teachers.

#### **3. Hiring and Training Exceptional Staff and Mentors**

High-quality staff and mentors who can nurture relationships with youth, create an environment of trust and security, and provide in-depth artistic experiences were identified as key contributors to successful youth arts program fundraising. According to six respondents, the quality of the program's staff and mentors—both those who run the program and those who work with students—directly influenced the effectiveness of the program. Ensuring that qualified, committed staff and mentors implement programs and actively engage youth was viewed as an important strategy for achieving positive youth development outcomes, which, in turn, were seen as helping programs to secure funding.

#### **4. Raising Funds from a Variety of Sources**

The data indicate that all programs received a mix of financial support from a variety of sources, including federal arts and non-arts funders, state and municipal agencies including the Massachusetts Cultural Council, foundations, corporations, individuals, and, in one program, earned income. (See Table 1.) Parent organizations

**Table 1. Funding Sources**

	FEDERAL SUPPORT <sup>1</sup>	STATE SUPPORT <sup>2</sup>	MUNICIPAL SUPPORT <sup>3</sup>	FOUNDATIONS	CORPORATE SUPPORT	INDIVIDUAL DONATIONS	EARNED INCOME	INTERNAL ORGANIZATION CONTRIBUTION
Program A		✓		✓				✓
Program B	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
Program C <sup>4</sup>	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓
Program D		✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
Program E	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓

<sup>1</sup>Federal support represents, for Programs B and C, funding from the NEA and the Coming Up Taller Awards program. Program E has also received federal support from the U.S. Departments of Labor and Justice and through Community Development Block Grant funds.

<sup>2</sup>State support in all cases is provided by the YouthReach program of the Massachusetts Cultural Council.

<sup>3</sup>Municipal support is provided through the local cultural council, an arts-related funder.

<sup>4</sup>Program C was funded, in part, by the parent organization's educational endowment.

**Table 2. Non-monetary Support**

	TECHNICAL SUPPORT	VOLUNTEERS	ADVERTISING & PROMOTION	PROGRAM SUPPLIES	EQUIPMENT	FACILITY & SPACE	HOSPITALITY & FOOD	OTHER GIFTS
Program A								
Program B		✓				✓		
Program C						✓	✓	
Program D		✓		✓	✓			
Program E	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

**Table 3. Strategies for Sustainability and Resource Development**

	BUILDING COMMUNITY SUPPORT	CULTIVATING & STEWARDING KEY CHAMPIONS*			HIRING & TRAINING STAFF & MENTORS	RAISING FUNDS FROM A VARIETY OF SOURCES	MAXIMIZING FEDERAL, STATE & MUNICIPAL SUPPORT	GENERATING IN-KIND SUPPORT	CREATING EARNED INCOME	DEMONSTRATING & COMMUNICATING RESULTS	PROMOTING INDIVIDUAL GIVING
		LEGISLATORS	INTERNAL	EXTERNAL							
Program A		✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	
Program B	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
Program C	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Program D	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Program E	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓

\*Cultivating and stewarding key champions is a widely used strategy among case programs. This strategy is further broken down into three components to reflect study participants' distinctions between cultivating, on the one hand, elected officials and other external champions such as community leaders, business leaders, and media; and, on the other, stewarding internal champions including board members, key staff, students, teachers, and parents.

of four of the five programs contributed internal financial resources to support their programs. Only one organization reported having a permanent endowment.

This approach of seeking funds from a variety of sources, whether used intentionally or not, enabled programs to be less dependent on any one source of funding and, in theory, more sustainable. If one funder reduces its support or cuts funding altogether—a possibility cited by a majority of respondents as a major obstacle to program sustainability and growth—other funding sources are likely already in the pipeline.

### 5. Maximizing Public Funding

Programs B and C experienced success in accessing public funds from federal, state, and municipal arts agencies such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Massachusetts Cultural Council's YouthReach program, and the local cultural council. Program E was successful in accessing federal funding from both arts and non-arts agencies alike, including the NEA, National Endowment for the Humanities, U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, and the Community Development Block Grant program, in addition to receiving funding from the state cultural council.

### 6. Generating In-kind Support

In addition to financial support, organizational leaders and program staff of four of the five programs secured non-monetary support as a deliberate strategy to reduce operating costs. The resources obtained included facilities, volunteers, technical support, advertising and promotion, program supplies and equipment, hospitality and food, and other gifts. (See Table 2.) For Programs B and C, in-kind support in the form of pro-bono use of facilities represented *core* support for the program.

### 7. Creating Earned Income

Program D was the only program that created earned income; it hosted occasional auctions of participating youths' artwork. Though this strategy produced a modest amount of funding, it was an intentional strategy to supplement contributed income.

### 8. Demonstrating and Communicating Program Results

Program evaluation was viewed by the vast majority of study participants as an important factor in program funding and sustainability for two reasons: It provides evidence that the program produces positive youth development results, making the case for funding need, and it provides information on ways program leaders can

## EVALUATING AND COMMUNICATING PROGRAM RESULTS

"It's up to the organization to do the translation; not all non-arts funders are going to get it—that's why I say a specific strategy is being able to talk about your youth development program. Other funders want to hear the other side.... You need to be able to be fluent in all languages, in the funders' language."

—H. MARK SMITH, YOUTHREACH PROGRAM MANAGER, MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL

"The best bet is building a solid model and making [program assessment] an inherent part of that model. One funder is not going to last forever, and you have to be able to move quickly. Developing a solid model that can be presented in front of a variety of funders, whether they be small local foundations or corporate sponsorships or state funding—it's necessary to have all pieces in order so you're able to shop your program."

—TRACI SLATER-RIGAUD, PROGRAM MANAGER, COMING UP TALLER AWARDS PROGRAM OF THE PRESIDENT'S COMMITTEE ON THE ARTS AND THE HUMANITIES

improve their programs. All five programs used their evaluation results in a variety of ways to promote the effectiveness of their programs to potential and existing funders. For example, administrators and staff included the information in grant applications, brochures, media stories, and personal websites.

### 9. Promoting Individual Giving

Capital campaigns, annual fund appeals, and special events were some of the ways in which organizations promoted individual giving. Four of the five study programs received individual contributions in direct support of their youth arts programs.

### Key Findings

Table 3 illustrates the strategies for sustainability and resource development employed by the five sample OST youth arts programs in Massachusetts. Cultivating and stewarding program champions, hiring and training exceptional staff and mentors, and demonstrating and communicating program results appeared to be the most widely practiced strategies. The strategy of creating earned income was used only by Program D. This may suggest an opportunity for study participants to explore the potential for earned income as a new source of revenue.

The data in Table 3 and other responses from study participants suggest several key findings related to our research questions.

### Fundraising a Challenge

Study participants rated the responsibility of fundraising for their youth arts programs to be either "a significant

challenge” (six respondents) or “somewhat of a challenge” (seven respondents). In most instances, the program managers, executive directors, and artistic directors were the ones who viewed fundraising as “a significant challenge,” while development directors and business managers, who work directly with raising and managing funds, perceived it as “somewhat of a challenge.” Development directors tended to agree that more resources are available to support youth-related programming than other areas of organizational operations.

In all five programs, fundraising appeared to be a shared responsibility among staff, including executive and artistic directors, development directors, program managers, and grantwriters; none of the five youth arts programs relied solely on one person to raise the necessary resources to fund the program.

The majority of the programs’ parent organizations employed full-time professional development staff to help raise funds for the youth arts programs. The one program that did not employ full-time development staff was the only one to recruit volunteer fundraising assistance. Notably, the only parent organization that did not employ development staff had the broadest base of financial and in-kind support among the study programs.

### **Mix of Sources**

OST youth arts programs included in this study generated a diverse mix of support from government sources, foundations, businesses, individuals, earned income, in-kind gifts, and their own organizations’ internal contributions.

All five programs generated income from three to six different funding sources, including public and private

sources. The mix varied among programs. A recent study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation and conducted by Public/Private Ventures and The Finance Project shared a similar finding. *The Cost of Quality Out-of-School-Time Programs* (Grossman, Lind, Hayes, McMaken, & Gersick, 2009) concluded that “OST programs typically relied on three to five sources of funding, balancing public and private sources” (p. v).

### **Best Practices in Resource Development**

Programs were found to have employed a diverse mix of best-practice strategies for resource development and sustainability as identified in the literature. Of the nine strategies identified in this study, three programs employed eight, one employed seven, and one program used only three. The most widely practiced strategies appeared to be cultivating and stewarding key champions, hiring and training exceptional staff and mentors, and demonstrating and communicating program results. The program that employed the least diverse set of strategies also had the least diverse base of support and was at the greatest risk for discontinuance due to major challenges in securing outside funding.

### **Unreliable and Unpredictable**

Study participants perceived their greatest challenges to sustainability and resource development to be the unreliability and unpredictability of funding. Most respondents indicated that they could not predict *where* the money would come from to continue their programs. Several respondents noted that the *level* of support was unreliable. Several questioned why funders tend to decrease or eliminate funding for seasoned and effective programs in favor of new, unproven ones.

### **Exceptional Staff as Key**

Study participants viewed hiring and training exceptional staff and mentors to be the most important single factor in successful fundraising and program sustainability. We interpreted this practice, described repeatedly by study participants, to be a key strategy for enhancing program effectiveness and thereby promoting resource development and sustainability. Study participants—even development directors whose primary responsibility is fundraising—revealed a noticeable preference to talk more about the content of the program than about the funding and sustainability strategies we were researching. This preference reinforced the finding that a majority of participants strongly felt that program effectiveness is the cornerstone of effective fundraising.

## **FACTORS IN SUCCESSFUL RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY**

Study participants often named factors in program effectiveness when asked to identify successful resource development strategies:

*...getting to the kids and being able to help them.*

*Success in resource development... It's human resources mostly.... That's the resource that is most important.*

*...hiring good people. If you hire somebody that's not good, say goodbye quickly.... Really listen to the kids. See if they are building real relationships with the kids. [We] need a staff that appreciates what it's like to fundraise.... [We] always have to figure out what we're doing right and what we're doing wrong.*

*Have a deeply meaningful mission and then live it.... Make sure everything works and relates back to the mission.*

## WHY SOME HIGH-QUALITY OST YOUTH ARTS PROGRAMS FAIL

### No Written Plan

Though a formal process for sustainability planning was described in the literature as being central to successful resource development and sustainability (Backer & Barbell, 2006; Hamilton Fish Institute & National Mentoring Center, 2007), we found that study participants did not regularly engage in written planning.

### Interpreting the Data

The findings of this limited-sample study suggest some conclusions about resource development and sustainability for OST youth arts programs.

**There is no one-size-fits-all approach.** While we saw a high degree of overlap in the resource development strategies used, each program included in this study employed a customized combination of three to eight best-practice strategies. This finding suggests that programs tailored their approaches based on a variety of factors, including human and financial resources, the surrounding community and its funders, and the program's specific needs.

**A written plan may not be crucial.** A consistent lack of resource development and sustainability plans in the programs studied may indicate that such a plan is not necessary for successful youth arts fundraising. The key to successful development might lie not in organized efforts, but rather in *consistent* and *creative* efforts. The strategies identified by study participants seemed to be exercised as part of an intuitive approach to resource development and sustainability rather than a formal, systematic one. Study participants seemed to view the fundraising approaches they described less as *strategies* than as integrated *activities* that nonprofit organizations naturally engage in to support their mission-based work.

**Program quality does not guarantee funding.** Three of the five programs involved in this study received national recognition for their excellence in innovative programming from the highly competitive Coming Up Taller Awards program of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities. Yet even for these high-quality, effective programs, funding remains a constant challenge. Accolades, name recognition, and a solid track record of positive program results seemed to help programs leverage funding, but they did not replace the need for resource development strategies.

**Size—of the budget or the program—doesn't matter.** In this study, the program that had by far the smallest budget, and the only one of the five programs that did not employ a director of development, seemed to be the most successful in securing a broad base of financial and in-kind support. What makes this program

"Good intentions don't pay the bills.... There are a lot of great teaching artists, historians, caring adults who are willing to leap head first into these community-based programs but don't understand the necessity of building an infrastructure that is sustainable."

—TRACI SLATER-RIGAUD, *COMING UP TALLER*

"Some of the programs that don't exist anymore—they were projects of an individual or small group of people and the organization acted like a fiscal agent. Not a lot of the institution's efforts went into supporting the program. Then there's another whole group of programs that don't exist because the institution itself did not have the strength and was on shaky ground. Program strength is strongly linked to the strength of the institution."

—H. MARK SMITH, *YOUTHREACH, MASSACHUSETTS CULTURAL COUNCIL*

successful? Is it the content of the program, the nature of its community, or the ingenuity of the staff? Or does the program simply employ the right mix of strategies? Further inquiry may provide a better understanding of the reasons.

**Best practices prove their worth.** The high degree of overlap in best-practice strategies for resource development and sustainability found in the literature and used by this study's sample suggests that, whether or not program leaders recognized it, their fundraising success could be attributed to their use of these best-practice strategies.

**Programs tend to combine a variety of funding sources and fundraising approaches.** A broad base of support, both financial and in-kind, is important to resource development and sustainability. The unpredictability and unreliability of funding encouraged fundraisers to seek support from a variety of sources, including foundations, corporations, individuals, and government agencies. Program leaders and staff also tended to secure support not only from a variety of sources, but in a variety of ways, including grantwriting, soliciting corporate sponsorships, generating earned income, seeking in-kind donations, and contributing their own organization's cash. Nonmonetary or in-kind support, typically in the form of facility space, equipment and supplies, marketing and advertising, professional expertise, volunteers, and hospitality and food, often helped programs reduce operating costs. For two programs that received rent-free facilities, in-kind support represented *core* support.

**Opportunities exist for further diversification.** The study results suggest that programs may find additional funding opportunities, particularly in the categories of individual giving and earned income. A 2007 report from the Giving USA Foundation said that

individual giving accounted for 75.6 percent of total U.S. philanthropic contributions, or \$223 billion, with foundations accounting for 12.6 percent, and corporations and corporate foundations representing 7.6 percent, or \$12.7 billion (“Charitable Giving Reached \$295 Billion,” 2007). Thus, the practice of promoting individual giving warrants closer consideration. In addition, creation of earned income was the least practiced strategy among the programs in this study, with only one program implementing it. These two areas seem to offer opportunities for new avenues of support for the OST youth arts programs in this study.

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