REPORT OF FINDINGS
FOR MCLEAN COUNTY ARTS CENTER & THE ILLINOIS ARTS COUNCIL

Arts Organization Needs Study

Research with Illinois arts leaders

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sloverlinett STRATEGIES Audience research and planning for the mission-driven world.

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Background & Objectives

In collaboration with the Illinois Arts Council and the Arts & Business Council of Chicago, Slover Linett Strategies conducted a multi-phase Arts Organization Needs Study focused on Chicago-area arts organizations. Conducted in late 2011 and early 2012, the study was designed to provide local arts service organizations (ASOs) with fresh insight and tools to help arts organizations chart new paths toward sustainability and success in a rapidly changing context.

In the initial phases of this work, we learned a great deal about the challenges facing arts organizations in the Chicago area and engaged representatives from the Chicago arts community in a collaborative strategy-development process to identify what arts organizations could do differently in order to achieve and sustain artistic and financial success. This research-and-planning process culminated with the development of a number of proposed solutions for how arts organizations and the art service sector can work together to develop and experiment with new organizational structures, decision-making processes, and mission-relevant, and sustainable sources of earned revenue.

The research summarized in this report aimed to engage other areas of the state in this important work. The McLean County Arts Center, in partnership with the Illinois Arts Council, hoped to gauge the relevance of the needs, challenges, and solutions identified in this initiative to the arts communities in other regions of Illinois. The specific objectives of the state-wide research were to:

1. Understand the common challenges facing all arts organizations

2. Understand the unique challenges that non-profit arts organizations outside of Chicago face

3. Continue identifying new ways for arts organizations and service organizations and funders throughout the state to work together to overcome the challenges facing the sector

This brief report is a complement to the Chicago report, highlighting the findings of this statewide research effort.

Methodology

Slover Linett conducted in-depth telephone interviews in July and August 2012 with 10 arts and cultural leaders across the state of Illinois. Working closely with the Illinois Arts Council and the McLean County Arts Center, we selected leaders who represented a mix of geographic regions (northern, central, and southern Illinois), organization types (arts organization, local arts council, service organization), and disciplines.

Each interview lasted about 45 minutes. We asked interviewees to read the final Chicago study report prior to the interview so they could speak to how well the challenges and potential solutions described in the report reflected the situation in their region, articulate other high-priority challenges they face, and brainstorm additional potential solutions.

In particular, they were asked to react to the 10 areas of need identified in the Chicago study:

- Financial Resources
- Human Resources
- Audience Development and Marketing
- Board Development
- Space
- Programming
- Vision and Identity
- Partnership and Collaboration
- Innovation
- Implementation Support

As well as the five ideas for ways arts organizations and the service sector can develop and experiment with new, mission-relevant, and sustainable sources of earned revenue:

- Earned income incubator
- Online arts market
- Microfinance model
- R&D programming lab
- Cultural corporate connection

Overview of findings

Overall, interviewees felt that the needs and challenges identified in the Chicago phase of the study described the situation facing arts organizations in their own region quite well. In fact, for many interviewees their first reaction was to comment on how much they had in common with the Chicago organizations and how well the report resonated with them; many felt that in reading about the state of the arts in Chicago they could have just as easily been reading about the arts ecosystem in their local community.

The differences that interviewees did identify were often differences of degree rather than of kind. Arts groups in certain areas feel some needs and challenges more acutely and others less acutely than organizations in Chicago (or other parts of the state), primarily because of differences in the climate in which these organizations operate. That is, the mechanics of running an arts organization are more or less the same in each region, but there may be differences in the social, political, and economic landscape—which influence the degree to which any particular challenge is felt by an arts organization.

The landscape for arts organizations in Illinois

Interviewees pointed to the following differences in the landscape surrounding arts organizations across the state versus those in Chicago:

Smaller, more homogenous communities

The lower population density in communities outside of Chicago means that arts groups across the state simply have smaller audiences for their performances, festivals, and exhibitions. But beyond sheer numbers, interviewees note differences in the level of interest in the arts among individuals in their communities. Large metropolitan cities like Chicago may attract or retain residents who strongly value the many varied arts and culture opportunities that city life affords. On the other hand, those who chose to live in smaller towns, suburbs, or rural areas may place less importance on having easy access to a diverse set of arts experiences.

One interviewee noted that while the classics are a relatively easy sell, finding audiences interested in more contemporary and challenging works is difficult outside of the city. And because these communities tend to be more homogenous, organizations with a focus on a specific ethnic or cultural heritage may be at a particular disadvantage when it comes to finding individuals in their community interested in what they have to offer.

"We—just because of numbers—don't have the financial resources or audience resources they would have in Chicago."

"We're struggling with getting bodies in the audience. We all present an excellent product, but the audience demographic has changed."

"It's pretty easy to sell out the Nutcracker, but when we get to Ron K. Brown, it's a harder ticket to sell."

Fewer human resources

The size of a community doesn't just have implications for an arts organization's audience; it also affects staffing and human resources at the organization. Interviewees pointed to a difficulty in finding qualified staff and volunteers in their communities who are willing and able to fill key positions in the organization, and see a need for increased training for staff and executive directors. In part, this may simply reflect the smaller talent pool that comes with a smaller community. But these organizations may also be missing out on the cross-training opportunities provided in larger metropolitan areas like Chicago, where arts groups can recruit executive directors and staff who cut their teeth at other area organizations.

"The need for professional development and human resources: I think that's paramount."

"We don't have professional staff on hand that can do a strategic plan."

"The folks running these organizations are artists first, and then take on those other things because they have to. Few of them jump into this because their passion is bookkeeping."

Funding limitations

The perception among interviewees is that there is simply less public and corporate support for the arts in their areas of the state than in Chicago. Particularly when it comes to corporate funding, arts organizations across the state find themselves competing for funding with social service providers. Interviewees say that the local corporations that once supported the arts are now focusing on funding health and human services. As a result, organizations find that they need to make a case for the tangible economic impact of the arts on their communities in order to attract corporate support.

Perceptions of the availability of funding differed across interviewees from different regions of the state. In more politically conservative areas of the state, for example, organizations perceive that the public's pro-business perspective translates to an expectation that organizations should make it on their own—without outside support. On the other hand, arts organizations operating in bi-state regions benefit from the opportunity to apply for funding in both states.

"'Enriching the community' is not as easy to define as, 'we're going to feed the hungry.'"

"Corporate donations are very scarce. [Arts groups] are hearing, 'We're giving to food and shelter, and the arts are lowest on the list.'"

"You're supposed to figure out how to run your shop. Don't be looking for a handout."

Isolation of organizations

Arts organizations throughout the state of Illinois are more geographically isolated from one another than are organizations in Chicago. This has both positive and negative effects on arts organizations. The benefit of this isolation is that any given theater company or dance group has fewer competitors operating in the same space in their communities. But the challenge is that they also have fewer peers with whom to collaborate or share information, ideas, and best practices. Emerging organizations in particular may find themselves without a supportive

arts community to turn to for guidance as they struggle to establish themselves, build a board, identify and develop audiences, and staff their organization.

At the same time, it is important to note that this isolation was felt most deeply in the more rural areas of the state. In contrast, interviewees said, arts organizations in more populous areas of the state may find that there are too many organizations operating in the same space and not enough audience to go around.

"We're not competing with others. Where I suppose in Chicago you might have some of that."

"Isolation. The peer group that I would need to develop in order to have best practices in place, that is something that has only recently been an area of focus."

Needs and challenges among Illinois arts organizations

As mentioned earlier, for the most part all of the needs and challenges identified by Chicago arts organizations resonated strongly with interviewees across the state. Indeed, these arts leaders did not articulate any new needs beyond those present in the Chicago study. But as a result of the particular landscape surrounding arts organizations in other areas in Illinois, arts leaders are even more sensitive to particular needs and challenges. Our interviewees focused on the following challenges:

Partnership and Collaboration

Interviewees emphasized the importance of collaboration and partnership with other arts groups as vital to the survival of their organizations. Some have forged successful collaborations with other organizations in their region—including joint programmatic ventures as well as resource sharing and other types of back office/organizational partnerships. Interviewees who have been part of successful collaborations point to the recent economic downturn as a catalyzing agent that spurred many arts groups to reach out to other organizations in their area.

But other interviewees say such collaborations have been rare in their region. They point to the geographic isolation organizations face in the more rural areas of the state, which makes forming these collaborations particularly challenging. One interviewee noted that the lack of collaboration is self-perpetuating—many organizations are hesitant to collaborate with others because they lack previous experiences with successful partnerships. Others described barriers to collaboration similar to those identified in the Chicago study: a lack of time and resources to manage such collaborations—particularly when organizations are fighting just to survive—as well as competition and mistrust.

"When I started, [artists] were afraid to share what they were doing… but the economy has knocked that out of people."

"We've really seen a growth in partnership and collaboration, which is not always easy. [Organizations] don't want mission creep, but as a survival technique we need to pool our resources."

"My experience has been that artists are not very open and sharing because we're so busy protecting our turf and so busy trying to survive."

"We don't have a long tradition of collaborating with each other, so it will take time. We need to have some successful examples [first]."

Board Development and Management

Board development and management is particularly challenging for Illinois arts organizations. Like the leaders of organizations in Chicago, executive directors of arts groups across the state may need help defining the board's role and understanding how best to use their capabilities, so that they can, in turn, educate board members on their responsibilities. In smaller communities, arts groups have fewer options for potential board members. And with fewer arts groups in each community, organizations may have limited opportunities to learn best practices in board development and management from peer organizations. This picture is complicated by the fact that boards may play more of an operational role, and not simply the traditional fiduciary role, in smaller arts organizations across the state.

"I also think the board needs to be very well versed in their role in supporting their organization and allowing the art to thrive, but not micromanaging the programming side of it."

"At the end of the year the board was surprised that they were supposed to do fundraising."

"We've had instances where you get someone on the board for certain talents and they decide they don't want to share those talents with you."

"I have one other full-time staff person and a few part-time staff, so I'm reliant on board members to run [my organization]."

Space

Several interviewees mentioned a lack of adequate space in their local communities. As a result, some arts groups need to travel long distances to other communities in order to rehearse and perform. This can be particularly difficult for ethnic arts groups who end up performing in communities that are less diverse than their own.

"We don't have the funding to have a rehearsal space that is ideal for what we do."

"Affordability for our individual artists is our biggest space need."

Risk-taking and innovation

Congruent with the findings from the Chicago study, interviewees felt the importance of risk-taking and innovation to the survival of the Illinois arts community could not be overstated. While arts organizations are comfortable taking risks when it comes to their programming (particularly if they feel their audiences can handle it), they find it harder to experiment with new business models and internal practices.

Organizations that are struggling simply to survive often shy away from uncertainty and risk, interviewees said. Moreover, arts organizations may need a collective safe space in which to

engage in risk taking, but are unable to find such space given the low density of arts organizations in many parts of the state. According to one interviewee, funders tend to be conservative and, as such, are unlikely to fund experimental projects, nor are arts groups likely to find support for risky projects in their local communities.

"Yes, there needs to be risk-taking; encouraging leaders to try new ways of structuring their staff."

"People give lip service to funding innovative projects, but corporate funders aren't willing to go out on a limb."

"We have limited resources in personnel and financial [areas] so we're just trying to maintain tried and true things and make sure they are done well."

Potential solutions to help arts organizations achieve success

Interviewees generally liked and were excited by the potential solutions put forth in the Chicago report for ways the art service sector and arts organizations can work together to achieve financial success. Many were particularly interested in the online arts market, as well as the corporate mentorships embedded in the cultural corporate connection.

But interviewees saw a number of barriers to implementing these ideas in their area. They felt that arts agencies and organizations would likely need a lot of support and guidance in implementing these ideas, because they are so different from what these groups typically do. And the risk inherent in these ideas may turn off organizations who are operating in the "survival mode" described above. Others noted that many areas of the state lack the infrastructure and service delivery options that would be necessary to implement these possible solutions.

One interviewee suggested that an organization like the Illinois Arts Council serve as a connector between corporate mentors and arts organizations that may not otherwise have the resources or know-how to reach out to corporations on their own. Another suggested mentoring, by other, more established arts organizations, be required for organizations to receive grant funding from the state.

"There's not a readily identifiable service sector that supports the arts in this town."

"We just have to figure out a way to be better connected to the corporations but not just for a hand-out.

"We don't have full time people we could have to go ask for those corporate sponsorships. We lack people with that sophisticated skillset that larger organizations in larger metropolitan areas have."

"I don't even know who'd deliver the service here."

Appendix

List of Interviewees

Interviewee	Organization Name
Susan Collins	Midwest Writing Center
David Cox	ARTSwil (President, also with Belleville Philharmonic)
Stephen Cummins	Illinois Presenters Network
Carmen Darland	Quad City Arts
Sue Greenberg	St Louis Volunteer Lawyers/Accountants for Arts
Doug Johnson	McLean County Art Association
Yvonne Knapp	Two Rivers Arts Council
Aimee-Lynn Newlan	Illinois Theatre Association
Anne O'Keefe	Rockford Area Arts Council
Sharon Reed	Heritage Ensemble

Interview Guide

(see next page)

ASO State Interview Guide

Introduction (3 min.)

- Interviewer role (independent researcher, conversation to last no more than an hour, interviewer to take notes, may need to interrupt and/or pause, etc.)
- The goal of these interviews is to understand the unique challenges that non-profit arts organizations outside of Chicago face—as well as the common challenges facing all arts organizations— and to continue identifying new ways for arts organizations throughout the state to receive they support they need to overcome these challenges.
- Confirm that interviewee read report sent in advance

Interview (25-40 min.)

[Note to interviewer: spend 5-10 minutes on Q1, 10-15 minutes on Q2, 10-15 minutes on Q3]

1. **Let's begin by talking about the summary of findings we sent you prior to the interview. What were your initial reactions to the report's content?**
   - What did you find most surprising in the report?
     - What was least surprising to you?
   - The report describes a vision of success among arts organizations in Chicago to be sustainable, mission-driven, artistic innovators that are essential to their communities.
     - How well does this vision of success map on to what success means for organizations in [your region/other parts of the state]?
       - What is missing from that vision of success?
       - Is any part of that vision less important or relevant for organizations in [your region/other parts of the state]?

2. **How well do the needs or challenges identified in the report reflect the challenges facing arts organizations in [your region/the state of Illinois as a whole]?**
   - Which of the challenges described in the report resonated with your own experience?
     - *Probe both on needs of own organization (for local arts agencies) as well as needs of entire community/region*
     - Which are most crucial to address for arts organizations [in your region/outside of Chicago] to achieve the kind of success we discussed earlier?
   - Which of the challenges described in the report are less important to address for organizations [in your region/outside of Chicago]?
     - In what way are those challenges less relevant for organizations [in your region/outside of Chicago]?
       - *Probe on whether needs are met by existing service offerings vs. needs do not exist for these organizations*
   - What unique needs or challenges do arts organizations [in your region/outside of Chicago] face beyond those described in the report?
     - What makes those needs/challenges particularly relevant for organizations [in your region/outside of Chicago]?

- What would need to change in order for those needs/challenges to be fully addressed?
  - *Probe on the existence of service offerings in their area that could help to address challenges and whether they are being adequately served by these organizations/offerings*

3. **The report describes a number of potential solutions stemming from the initial phases of the research to help arts organizations achieve and maintain success.**
   - Given the preliminary nature of these ideas, what would you add or change to make them more relevant for the arts community [in your region/outside of Chicago]?
     - *Probe on specific concepts:*
       - *Earned income incubator*
       - *Online arts market*
       - *Microfinance model*
       - *R&D incubator*
       - *Cultural corporate connection*
     - How would that/those change(s) make these ideas more relevant for arts organizations [in your area/across Illinois]?
   - Thinking about the unique challenges facing arts organizations [in your region/in Illinois], what else would it take for these organizations to achieve success?

Closing (2 min.)

- *Thank respondent for helpful input.*
- *Solicit any final ideas, comments, suggestions.*
- *Thank and close.*