What we mean by “Community Engagement”

**Community** describes a collection of people, places and organizations that are connected through some external factor, such as geographic location or cultural affinity. **Engagement** describes an active, two-way and long-term relationship in which one party motivates another to get involved or take action—and both parties experience change. Mutual activity and involvement are the keys to community engagement.

**Community Engagement** promotes consistent community relationships that are a step beyond conventional programmatic partnerships. Consistent community engagement is an integral and multi-layered part of the work culture of the arts provider; it is not activity-based, such as in collaboration or marketing to diverse audiences, nor is it solely program-based. (*Definition liberally adapted from National Guild for Community Arts Education.*)

- Involvement by citizens in the improvement of communities and other common work that benefits everyone; purpose is to address specific community social or civic needs; at its core, the idea of community engagement breaks down the misconception that arts and culture are simply entertainment vehicles to be patronized only by who are specifically interested in them (Ellen Rosewall, *Arts Management: Connecting Arts and Audiences in the 21st Century*).
- These are long-term projects (programs) and not short-term solutions (Diane Grams and Betty Farrell, *Entering Cultural Communities*).
- A process whereby institutions enter into mutually beneficial relationships with other organizations, informal community groups, or individuals (Doug Borwick, *Building Communities, Not Audiences*).

There is no magic formula for community engagement. Since every community has unique needs and opportunities, each organization participating in community engagement will be very different.

It’s important to remember that audience development is different than community engagement. Read more here. Community engagement...

- Aims to build a better community, not just a better organization.
- Requires long term commitment.
- Builds relationships outside the organization that benefit both parties.
- Seeks to know what the community cares about.
- Shares control with community groups.
- Results in things that are meaningful to the community.
- Involves risk and results in change in the organization and in the community.

**Best practices and Useful Tips**

from Dr. Brenda Lee Johnston, Assistant Professor of Arts Administration, Butler University

- Reach out to people first/Help fulfill their needs
- Enter with questions knowing the answers may not be what you want/expect to hear
- Be genuine (Avoid tokenism!)
- Understand your organization’s capabilities
• Be clear about your reasons for wanting to engage
• Understand history
• Pick the low-hanging fruit

Some potential outcomes of community engagement could include...

• Being invited to other conversations
• Increased/improved understanding of many/all sectors of our communities
• Increased respect among your constituencies and for your organization
• Stronger communities

And, while not the goal, community engagement could result in...

• Increased awareness and understanding for your organization and the work you do
• Increased participation
• Possibly new programs (that are developed WITH constituencies)

Here are some examples of community engagement:

- The Wing Luke Museum: Co-Creating Exhibitions
- City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program
- Arlington, Va. Department of Community Planning, Housing and Development and Cultural Affairs Division
- Artists and the Minneapolis Regulatory Services Department

Here are some resources to help you start thinking about engaging with your community:

- Guidelines for Engaging Communities, CTM Professional Services, Inc.
- Differences between audience development and community engagement, CTM Professional Services, Inc.
- Giving Community A Meaningful Voice, CTM Professional Services, Inc.
- Making Meaningful Connections, The James Irvine Foundation
- Arts Engaged
- Questionnaire to aid in understanding your community

There are lots of thoughtful people talking about community engagement. Here are some we’ve found helpful:

- Doug Borwick, former President of the Board of the Association of Arts Administration Educators, CEO of Outfitters4, Inc.
- Candance Tangorra Matelic, President of CTM Professional Services, Inc.