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Abstract

Rapid urban growth, an independent ethos, and affordable space for artists served the Seattle region as fertile ground for exponential growth of its arts sector since the 1960s and into the 21st century. An applied research project links the lived experiences of those who created this rich environment and those who seek to be future arts leaders. Graduate students in arts management are participating in a multi-year experimental research project to gather, document, and analyze regional arts and culture history. They are working across the community to identify noteworthy arts organizations, businesses, and events that have shaped the arts and culture ecosystem in the region, uncovering diverse perspectives, and setting the stage for future study of evolutionary relationships in the arts. Close collaboration with the University's Library has led to the creation of a publicly-focused digital timeline and website, with links to a nascent but growing institutional repository for student research and additional resources. The project has garnered significant interest and support from regional arts leaders and archives in the community.

This paper traces the development and the first three years of the research project, providing insights for academic programs wishing to embark on applied research projects with students and the community, and communities wishing to document and share understanding of their arts ecosystem. A recent burst of economic growth threatened to obliterate much of the history from the previous decades in the Seattle region. Now further transformation is expected as a result of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. An interest in capturing the stories and gaining insights from this vibrant past has brought together the academic and practitioner communities around this effort.

Arts Ecosystem Research Project: Linking Student Research with Community Benefit

The arts sector in Seattle grew at an unprecedented rate during the fifty years following the 1962 Century 21 Exposition, popularly known as the Seattle World's Fair. Perched at the far western edge of the country, Seattle followed its own independent path focused on its lumber and maritime resources for its first hundred years, and was widely considered a cultural backwater, earning its dubious distinction as a "cultural dustbin" in the 1940s (Lehmann & Lehmann, 1992). The World's Fair represented a desire and commitment by civic leaders to place the city on the world stage and contributed to Seattle becoming an active site of arts innovation and entrepreneurship, bringing culture into focus as a piece of the larger civic fabric (Becker, Stein, & HistoryLink Staff, 2011; Luis, 2012).

This threshold moment in Seattle's evolution launched numerous notable approaches to the creation, development, and presentation of the arts, heralding national leadership in public art, culturally specific theaters and museums, grassroots community festivals, and projects that transcend disciplines and link the nonprofit and commercial sectors. From the development of internationally-emulated forms of community-driven museum curation at the Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience, to the artist-activated enterprises of Dale Chihuly and Sub Pop Records, along with traditional and experimental arts offerings, the region grew from an arts backwater to a locus of cultural abundance and creativity. In recent years Seattle has consistently ranked near the top of many studies of cultural vitality and activity (Creative Cities International, 2011; Americans for the Arts, 2017; Voss, Voss, Fonner et al., 2019) and today is "recognized nationally and internationally for leadership and innovation in theater, music, glass art, and literary arts, is one of only a handful of U. S. cities to have a top-tier

symphony, ballet, and opera, and was recently designated a City of Literature in UNESCO's Creative Cities Network" (Voss, Voss, Awtry et al., 2018, p. 15).

Numerous factors contributed to this growth, yet the evolution of this arts ecosystem is poorly understood. There is a lack of documentation and examination of this period and little coordination in collecting information across the sector, hampering opportunities to look holistically and gain insights. Due to the relatively recent timeframe of this growth, many of the individuals involved are still able to contribute to the understanding of the legacy and lineage of this still young and vibrant arts ecosystem.

Concurrent with this time of significant arts sector growth in the Seattle region, the field of arts management grew nationally. New levels of professionalization led to the establishment of academic degrees in arts administration, management and other related programs. Today more than 100 programs make up the United States membership of the Association of Arts Administration Educators (Association of Arts Administration Educators, 2020). Graduates of these programs most often apply their academic knowledge in the field as practitioners, and such programs seek to find effective ways to link academic theory and practice.

The value of experiential learning and direct practice (Kolb, 2015; Mandel, 2017; Machtmes et al., 2009) has been explored in higher education as a powerful learning tool. Engaging students in historical research and related campus-community partnerships is of interest in numerous fields (Carpio et al., 2013; Erikson, 2011; Colin, 2016; Bringle & Hatcher, 2002) though the literature does not currently point to examples in arts management.

How can arts management graduate students best engage in learning about the innovation and entrepreneurship that built the arts communities they aspire to work in? What skills and experiences are needed to develop appreciation for the ways that applied research can help them

be effective future leaders in the arts? How can student research in the community expand sector knowledge, providing mutual benefit to students and the larger community? What lessons can the sector learn by investigating the way an arts ecosystem takes shape and evolves?

These questions were catalysts to the development of an experimental initiative started in 2018 at a graduate arts management program in Seattle. This paper explores the development of the project by linking applied research by graduate students and the creation of a public resource for the larger arts and culture community. The Arts Ecosystem Research Project focuses specifically on the Seattle region, though the framework for the project could be applied in other communities. We examine the opportunities and challenges of linking academic and community research, and the ways this work can have an impact on our understanding of and future assessment of arts ecosystems. We consider the potential of this initiative through the reflections of students, project advisors, community, and university leadership, and offer pathways for other academic programs and communities that wish to explore such projects.

Integrating Academic Learning and Creation of a Community Resource

The Arts Ecosystem Research Project (AERP) was envisioned from its inception as both an academic opportunity and an important community resource. The project's goals for academic learning are inextricably intertwined with intentions of larger community benefit: researching, documenting, and sharing information on Seattle's arts and culture sector. Outcomes must be examined with attention to multiple measures.

The project is based in the Master of Fine Arts in Arts Leadership program at Seattle University. The University is a private, Jesuit Catholic institution located in Seattle's Capitol Hill neighborhood. As one of the largest, independent universities in the Pacific Northwest, the University enrolls more than 7,700 students in undergraduate and graduate programs within eight

schools and colleges. In addition to its strong academic programs, the University has a strong commitment to community service and social justice. The Arts Leadership program, the first program of its kind on the West Coast, provides theoretical, business, and management training integrated with practical experience in arts leadership.

The MFA in Arts Leadership program requires students to master concepts and skills related to applied research in the field: research that extends traditional scholarship into the realm of practical application. A new course, Applied Research Seminar: Arts Innovation in Seattle, was offered for the first-time during winter quarter 2018 to teach these skills through participation in the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. The elective class and AERP are intended to provide deep value to participating students as part of their studies, giving them an opportunity for active and collaborative research. The seminar provides a foundation in qualitative research methods and exploration of arts-related sources of research. Students investigate the development of research questions and gain research method skills including interviewing, survey design, document review, and case study development, with research access to former and current arts leaders. Those who take the seminar also have opportunities to continue their connection to the project after completing the class via practicums, their capstone project, or through additional forms of research. Student scholarship, either as an individual or as part of the class team, contributes to the institutional repository housed at Seattle University's Lemieux Library & McGoldrick Learning Commons, reached via the AERP website. Individual works of scholarship indicate student authorship, and all participating students are acknowledged on the website.

Additionally, the project expands the department and the University's role as a community resource and partner, expanding its contribution to the arts community beyond

student practicums or internships, and creating a platform for arts professionals to share their expertise in ways that go beyond serving as guest speakers for classes. The project spotlights the University's research capabilities, complements the work of other repositories including museums and libraries in the region, and reflects the boarder potential of scholarship to reach beyond the academy in the digital age (Lynch, 2003; Sherman et al., 2017). AERP signals the University's interest and commitment to the larger community by providing a more holistic and scholarly approach to documentation of the arts. This project provides opportunities to leverage the Library's growing institutional repository and enhances the Library's exploration of sustainable digital projects (S. Watstein, personal communication, January 25, 2018).

The intent of AERP is to encourage not only student research but also exploration and analysis by others in the academic and larger community to inform the future of the sector by looking at the past for lessons of relevance. There have been inquiries from other academic and community programs in the region to explore how research done elsewhere can be linked through the AERP website.

The success of such projects is dependent on strong and positive relationships with the regional arts community. It is critical that there be willing participation in the collection of data from individuals in the arts sector. The support of arts leaders and funders is essential in validating the effort and encouraging participation. To ensure this support, the leadership of such a project benefits greatly from the creation of a team of highly regarded community advisors to open and encourage channels of community communication (Conlin, 2016). In the following section we explore these and other components of the first years of the project.

Building the Project: Inaugural Year

The genesis of the project came from an adjunct faculty member whose primary work as a consultant in the field provided perspective on the need and benefits for this research, both for students and in the larger community. Linking graduate student work with community benefit became the touchstone. Three key components were the foundation:

1. Development of academic skills and critical thinking to strengthen graduate students' ability to undertake and make use of research as arts leaders.
2. Collaboration with the University Library to establish a long-term and publicly accessible digital resource reaching the academic and larger community.
3. Creation of a project advisory group to ensure that every step reflected a multi-dimensional view of the regional arts ecosystem, and access to multiple networks.

An applied research seminar was scheduled for winter quarter 2018 with the founding adjunct faculty member as the Instructor. An advisory group was invited to participate prior to offering the seminar to inform development of the project and the class. Three individuals with multifaceted careers in the arts in the region, long-standing and abundant relationships in traditional, grassroots, and experimental arts sectors, and high community regard were asked to step up as Community Advisors. They were joined by a Research Services Librarian as the liaison from the Library and by the Director of the MFA in Arts Leadership program. The project was fortunate in that all the AERP Advisors were willing and able to bring their expertise to a nascent project with still undefined parameters.

Early tasks for Advisors were the review of the curriculum developed for the applied research seminar, identifying ways they would interact with the students, and assembling a preliminary list of individuals in the community as potential sources of data for the research. The

Instructor and program Director secured Institutional Review Board approval encompassing student research in multiple forms associated with the project.

Relationships with major local and regional arts agencies were considered critical in establishing the credibility of the project, and in laying a foundation for the research to provide community benefit over time. The Instructor met with leadership of the city and county arts agencies who affirmed the potential community benefits of the project goals. AERP also secured modest seed funding from these agencies to support some of the costs exceeding those allocated by the department, specifically for additional project management time, and honoraria for the non-university affiliated Advisors.

It was determined that the focus of this initial phase of research should be the fifty years from the World's Fair in 1962 to 2012. Factors influencing this research framework included the need to capture histories that were in the greatest danger of being lost, and the significant growth and impact of the tech sector since 2012 representing a new phase in the city's ecosystems. It was established that the project should ideally be ongoing, preferably for no less than ten years, and that research would extend beyond 2012 as time and resources permit. The collection of data, and then its analysis, was understood to be incremental since it was tied primarily to a single class each year.

Fifteen graduate students participated in the first applied research seminar, contacting an initial group of one hundred arts leaders for data collection. This was a subset of the larger lists identified by the Advisors and selected by the Instructor and Advisors to reflect a mix of artistic disciplines, as well as ethnic, racial, and cultural perspectives, with attention to reaching out to elders in the community.

The curriculum was designed to encourage all seminar students to work as part of a team, and to embrace the challenges and need for flexibility required working in the field. An emphasis was placed on timely and collaborative engagement in order to achieve the ambitious research goals within the constraints of the University's ten-week quarter system.

Students explored concepts and gained skills including:

- Defining the research question
- Research methods, with an emphasis on qualitative methods
- Understanding the national and regional context framing the research
- Defining innovation in the sector
- Developing criteria for project inclusion
- Navigating ethics in research
- Developing research tools including a survey and interview protocol
- Monitoring data collection
- Analysis of qualitative data
- Presenting findings
- Identifying future research options

It was acknowledged that this initial year, including the seminar, was experimental and its outcome would help to shape the future of the project, testing the premise of its value to students and in the larger community. The research goal for the class was the collection of data on noteworthy and seminal arts events, organizations, and businesses in the region from varied perspectives. This data would serve as the foundation for an initial set of entries to pilot the digital timeline. Advisors played an important role, directly interacting with students during three

class sessions and at the final presentation, sharing their experience, resources, and serving as sounding boards.

One hundred research subjects received an initial email from either the Instructor or an Advisor with whom they had an existing relationship, informing them of the project and of upcoming contact from a graduate student for either an interview or to complete an open-ended survey. Each student was assigned a minimum of two in-person interviews and a minimum of four survey recipients to track and communicate with.

By the end of the quarter seventy-four arts leaders had participated in the data collection efforts. More than 200 potential entries for the AERP timeline were identified, as well as a great deal of additional information on the context and evolution of the sector. Students interviewed a total of twenty-eight arts leaders. This was a nearly 80% rate of response to interview requests and reflected the community interest in contributing to the research project. Additionally, a total of seventy-one surveys were sent of which forty-six were completed, a 65% response rate. Respondents also provided more than 300 suggestions for additional potential research contacts and numerous offers to participate in further research such as case study development.

Each student drafted at least three entries for the timeline, drawing from the interviews and surveys that they had collected. They then undertook document review and fact checking. The results of this work were presented at the end of the class by turning a room in the Library into a physical timeline. Along with this visual manifestation, students shared their analysis of the emerging picture of the ecosystem and their experience as researchers. Leadership from the city and county arts agencies and other guests attended the presentation. Student insights included:

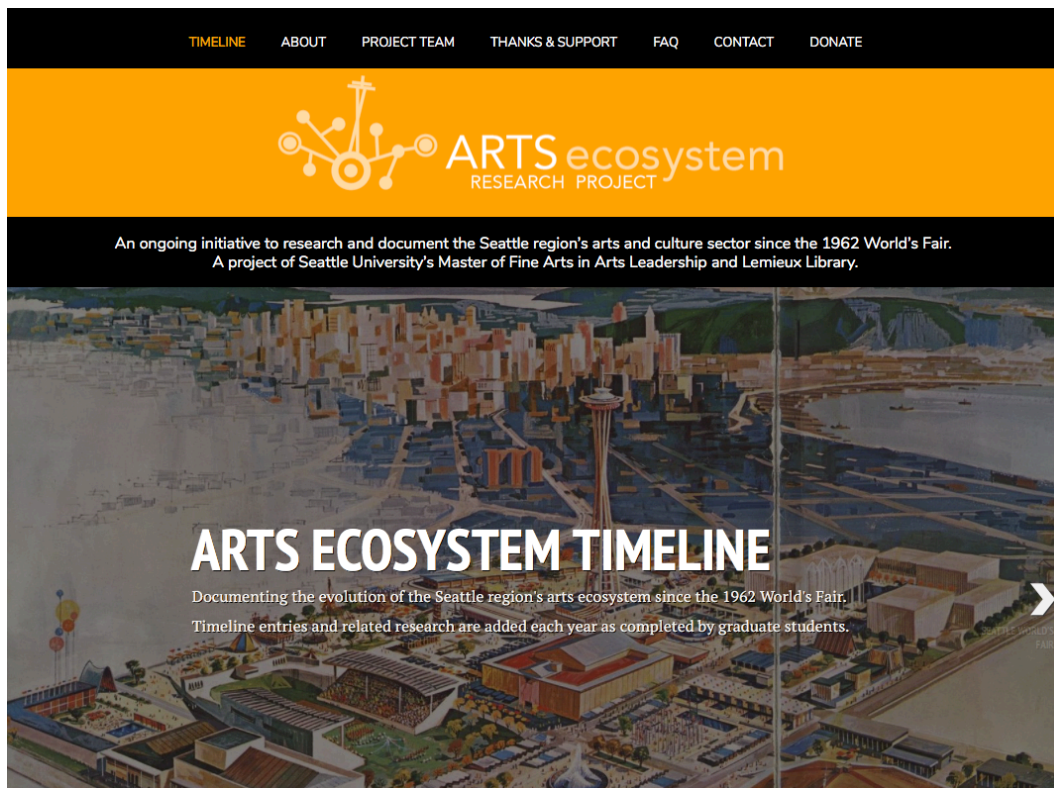
- New appreciation for the dedication and accomplishments of arts leaders across a broad swath of arts disciplines and types of entities, and in various communities.
- Awareness of the powerful roles that collaboration, partnership, and legacy play in the evolution of a region's arts sector.
- Interest in the ways that research can lead to better understanding of the influential roles that funding and facilities play in the arts.

Two students elected to continue working through the spring with the Instructor and the Advisors. As part of a practicum the students created spreadsheets to track and organize the data collected to make it more accessible for future analysis. They also completed additional research on selected timeline entries.

An update on the project was sent in May 2018 to all those who had participated in the research, as well as other interested community members. A number of recipients chose to reply with words of encouragement and offers of future involvement. The Instructor also received communiqués from some of those who had failed to respond in a timely fashion but who hoped to be included in future research, and from other individuals in the sector who had heard about the project and hoped to participate.

The spring and summer of 2018 was a concentrated period of work with the University Library on development of the website, identification of appropriate digital timeline software, and investigation into the capacities and limitations of the Library's existing institutional repository, ScholarWorks, for AERP scholarship. Many related issues were tackled with input from the Advisors and University Library staff: server location; branding to appropriately reflect the University and public dimensions of AERP; developing website and timeline copy;

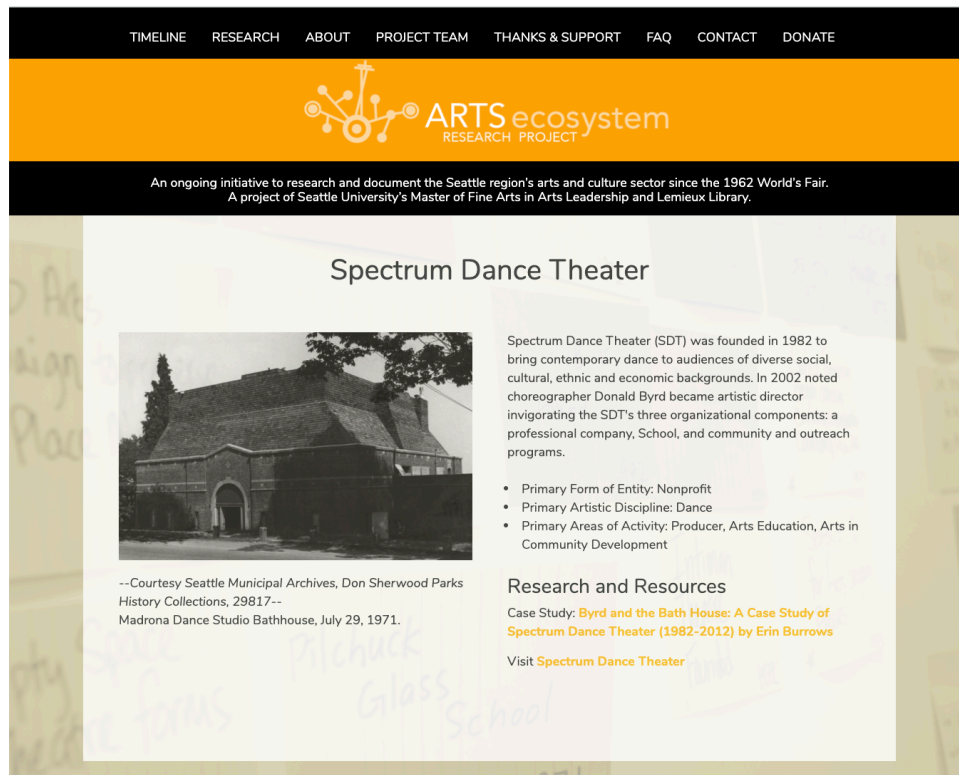
establishing effective forms of navigation of the website; issues of access to data; maintenance of the website; identifying images and clarifying rights and credit lines; and myriad other questions.



Arts Ecosystem Research project website: <https://www.seattleu.edu/artsecosystem/>

The website was identified by Advisors and community members as the key tool for “proof of concept” for this initial phase of the project. This visual platform, with the digital timeline showing a limited set of entries, was critical to discussions about the future of the project both within the University and in the larger community. The one hundred entries for this pilot phase of the timeline were selected from those entities that were identified in multiple interviews and/or survey responses and for which one or more students in the seminar had drafted a timeline entry. Each brief entry described the entity, was fact checked, and identified by their primary artistic discipline(s), the form of the entity, such as nonprofit, government, or for profit, and its primary type of activity, such as presenting or producing art, education, or funding

of arts. Defining each entry in three ways—artistic discipline, form of entity, and activity area—established the foundation for a search feature within the website.



Example entry for Spectrum Dance Theater

Advisors reviewed all draft entries based on criteria established for inclusion on the AERP timeline. Students had noted a minimum of two criteria they believed the entity met, which Advisors then confirmed or questioned for inclusion. Six AERP criteria were used:

1. Changed or significantly advanced the Seattle–local or regional–arts ecosystem.
2. Had a significant impact on local or regional culture, trends, or social attitudes.
3. Filled a community void or need in the Seattle region arts ecosystem, including access for specific communities.
4. Developed and implemented a new or different structure, presentation, or product in the arts, regionally or nationally.

5. Had a significant impact on the arts field or an arts discipline, and/or instigated new levels of creative artistic work regionally or nationally.
6. Served as a catalyst for future arts organizations/businesses/events in Seattle, and identified one or more that can trace their lineage to this.

The Second and Third Year

A second iteration of the seminar in winter quarter 2019 was adjusted to build effectively on the initial year. The academic foundation in research methods remained the same, while it was decided to explore a cycle of research for adding depth to the AERP timeline. The initial year focused on collecting data to identify the breadth of the arts ecosystem was followed by a focus on development of case studies of selected entries from the pilot timeline. Student research for these case studies included primary research through in-depth interviews and secondary research from a variety of sources. These case studies were the first AERP-related research destined for the institutional repository linked to the timeline.

Students conducted a total of twenty-seven interviews through the class and a related practicum. Community Advisors and the Instructor provided suggestions and contact information to enable students to connect with interviewees directly involved in the evolution of each entity. Student research was bolstered by a partnership created with the Seattle Public's Library Special Collections. Librarians provided customized access to materials for each entity studied thereby enriching the research process for students. Other regional archives offered students opportunities to work with their material, streamlining access to adapt to the brief ten-week quarter system. The Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) provided access to their extensive photographic archives, waiving fees for AERP usage.

Eleven case studies were completed by students at the end of the second applied research seminar. This set of case studies explored research questions from origin stories to examination of a particular program or moment of transition. The interviews provided rich material that students were able to integrate with research from a variety of records and sources. These initial case studies were considered exploratory and it was expected that many lessons would emerge to inform future student research.

Each case study was reviewed by all Community Advisors prior to being considered for inclusion in the public AERP repository. This review process provided a means to affirm that the case study accurately explored the topic, while accommodating student perspective.

Community Advisors collectively identified two case studies from the eleven submitted that they believed did not meet publishable standards. The remaining nine were then professionally edited by a contract editor with significant experience in the regional arts and culture sector. This process provided another layer of fact checking as well as aligning formatting and citation standards. The editor also used this process to develop a series of recommendations for future AERP case study guidelines including detailed format and style standards.

The building of the AERP website, creation of associated AERP data archives, and integration with Seattle University's new institutional repository, ScholarWorks, took place over 2019. The goal was a robust academic and community platform designed for scholarly and public access. A requirement was that the platform be flexible to accommodate the evolution of the project, responding to iterative lessons from the research process as well as academic and community usage. The development of the website was largely dependent on the expertise and availability of Lemieux Library staff. Their experience in information storage and digital access was instrumental in shaping these tools. Community Advisors provided feedback and served as

beta testers through multiple rounds. The Advisors also evaluated the benefits and limitations of releasing the website with only a pilot set of timeline entries and case studies. It was decided that it was important to provide access as soon as possible, with appropriate explanation of this still early phase in the project.

The website was publicly launched in December 2019, with an email notification to individuals who had participated in research to date, and other interested parties. Community feedback upon the public release of the website was positive, with comments such as the following from a museum director who felt that this project: "...is the basis of a whole new understanding of the region's arts infrastructure, and how it has evolved over many decades." (L. Garfield, personal communication, Dec 9, 2019)

The project received continued financial support from local and regional public funding agencies, joined by in-kind support from other sources. External funding proved critical in supporting stipends, honoraria, and editorial fees not covered by Seattle University budgets. The constraints of academic fundraising led to an additional pathway for financial support of the project through the creation of "Friends of the Arts Ecosystem Research Project" through local fiscal sponsor, Shunpike.

The applied research seminar was offered again as an elective for graduate students during winter quarter 2020. Advisors selected a research focus on organizations formed by and/or serving communities of color in the Seattle region, underscoring the AERP commitment to documenting diverse arts and culture in the region. Twelve existing timeline entities were identified from which eight students each selected one for case study development. Students identified individuals with direct experience with each entity, with input from Advisors and the Instructor. A total of 18 in-depth interviews were conducted, supplemented by research

supported by Seattle University's Library as well as Seattle Public Library and regional archives. An important element for 2020 was the provision of detailed AERP case study guidelines and a style sheet based on the prior year's case study experience, increasing clarity for students and to reduce editing time in preparation for the digital repository.

AERP student practicums and research assistant positions were offered during winter and spring quarters 2020 through the Arts Leadership department and the Library. A one-time allocation from the College of Arts and Sciences permitted the hiring of an AERP Graduate Assistant for 12 weeks. These roles permitted additional work to be accomplished, developing and creating access to additional content on the timeline and in the repository. This included linking all timeline entries to currently available organization websites; identifying and providing links to digitally-archived audio of relevance for 29 organizations and events from KUOW-FM, Seattle's local National Public Radio affiliate; identifying and posting selected images to the timeline from MOHAI and other archive sources; as well as locating and providing timeline links for regional and national archives with significant holdings of relevance. Additionally, the graduate assistant made improvements to administrative and digital filing systems. AERP online content was further enlarged by identifying a set of relevant case studies previously developed for a course on cultural infrastructure and facilities. The student authors were contacted and readily agreed to have their papers included as part of AERP.

The founding Community Advisors completed their terms in the third year and were replaced by new, equally strong community members with decades of cultural leadership. An additional advisor position was added and filled for an alumnus of the MFA in Arts Leadership program who had completed the applied research course. Financial support continued from a

major regional public funder, but with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, other expected sources of income became unavailable.

Perspectives and Reflections

AERP was designed to be iterative, with each step helping to shape subsequent steps, while staying focused on its three key components:

1. Development of academic skills in applied research in the arts.
2. Establishment of a publicly accessible digital resource on the regional arts ecosystem.
3. Working with project advisors to ensure an inclusive approach to this work and community benefit.

The insights of the AERP Advisors and leadership played a vital role in shaping each step of the project, together with evaluations, reflections, and recommendations from the students. Community feedback, both formal and informal, was carefully considered. Collectively, these perspectives determined what was, and was not, working, and identified new ideas, approaches, and improvements.

The first full year of AERP activity was assessed through students input, data collected from Advisors, and a meeting held with community leadership in the sector. Class evaluations, student recommendations, and departmental conversations were key in assessing how well the academic goals were achieved. Students also provided insights on the community response to the project since students shared many of the comments they encountered from interviewees. Student participation in the research was seen by Arts Leadership faculty to have successfully developed the applied research skills of students, and to have provided an important learning experience for aspiring arts leaders. The program Director cited the enthusiasm of students who wished to use AERP in their other academic work.

Advisor interviews and discussions provided information on all three components, and identified project challenges. A student practicum in 2018 focused on capturing project leadership stories on the evolution of AERP to date. The student, who had participated in the seminar, conducted video interviews with the three Community Advisors as well as the Librarian, Instructor, and Director of the department. This research also resulted in a video for the website.¹

Community leaders and supporters were invited to a meeting at the close of the inaugural year at the county arts agency to view a demonstration of the AERP website under development and to assess community benefit and the future of the project. In addition to feedback on the pilot timeline and an update on the project, representatives of regional arts agencies, repositories, and arts funders participated provided their viewpoints on the progress to date, and the potentials of the project for the community. Regular communication and updates with project funders were conducted in subsequent years, and email comments were collected from community members.

The Student Experience

Students were asked to provide written reflections and recommendations for the future of AERP as well as University-required evaluations at the conclusion of each applied research course. The course received very high scores within the University's evaluation system, especially the first year, with the majority of students providing positive comments on their level of skill development and engagement with the project. The bridging of theory and practice was noted repeatedly, and enthusiasm was reflected in comments such as "When does a student get a chance to work on a major research project, speak to major arts leaders, and get hands-on field

¹ Arts Ecosystem Research Project Documentary: <https://youtu.be/2BaE2U9B35s>

practice interviewing and surveying the Seattle arts community leaders? This class... way beyond book learning. Very glad I had this course.”

During the second and third year—when students developed case studies—students expressed strong engagement with the project but also frustration with the challenges inherent in undertaking applied research involving in-depth interviews along with secondary research during a ten-week quarter system. The actual interview experience was highly valued though the process of scheduling was often fraught with logistical roadblocks. The volume of content on research methods mixed with application in the field was overwhelming for some students.

A number of themes emerged in student reflections over the three years:

- Capturing and reviewing history is empowering for students.
- Collaboration is a critical aspect of the evolution of Seattle’s arts ecosystem.
- It is valuable to document the life of an organization even if it is over. This provides wisdom.
- Arts facilities play a powerful role in an arts ecosystem.
- Arts funding shapes an arts ecosystem, and a better understanding of finances and funding is needed to intentionally shape the future of the sector.
- Individual arts leaders and their connections to communities are key factors in creating and sustaining the ecosystem.
- There is a strong need and benefit in identifying and documenting stories from marginalized communities in the sector.
- Social and economic factors, local to global, are important when examining an arts and culture ecosystem.
- This is just the beginning of the AERP journey to gather and share this material.

The students envisioned many ways that this research could be of value to the community and in their own work. Students identified possible future collaborations for presentation and expansion of the research. They outlined a multitude of online and virtual tools that could grow from this platform. There was interest in a physical installation of the timeline and exploration of possible methods of audience engagement or crowd sourced participation in the future.

Insights on the power of funding caused a number of students to emphasize the need for more awareness of how money shapes the arts ecosystem. Students also were attuned to ways that AERP research revealed how “inclusivity, collaboration, partnership and the ability to take risks are all essential components of a healthy arts community. Additionally, women, particularly women of color and members of the LBGTQ+ community have played a key role in nurturing the ecosystem through mentorship and the creation of innovative organizations that fill a void in Seattle.”

The linkages and interdependence of the arts ecosystem was noted repeatedly and there was the hope that future research might lead to the creation of a “sort of genealogical tree and trace back the lineage of these innovative organizations to specific people, to develop an understanding of their influence throughout the city’s ecosystem.” Many students were struck by the impact that specific individuals have on innovation in an ecosystem.

One student emphasized the importance of such research for the millennial generation as they move towards leadership in the arts, both to build a strong foundation of understanding, and as inspiration. Overall, a sense of ownership, accomplishment and pride was expressed. A number of students noted how the project helped them feel they were now becoming part of the ecosystem. They judged the work to have been challenging, exciting, and for some, “completely out of comfort zone.”

The students, based on their research interactions with community members, confirmed the potential of AERP to create community benefit. As one student put it “the community voice has spoken and reassured us that this project is needed.”

The Advisor, University and Community Perspective

Community Advisors and the Instructor collectively brought more than 150 years of experience in the arts in Seattle to their reflections on its first year. Interviews with them highlighted the importance of the Arts Ecosystem Research Project as a much-needed living record of the history of the arts and culture ecosystem in Seattle, and that nothing else like it was in existence. The initial year was seen as proving AERP’s potential and value as a tool for Seattle’s arts community, providing the opportunity to contemplate the breadth and diversity of the arts in Seattle, and that the website and research could serve as a valuable resource for researchers and scholars far beyond Seattle. In subsequent years these core ideas remained constant. Advisors in year three specifically expressed the need to “stay the course” and continue to build on the foundation of a timeline with related cases studies and other resources. The importance of capturing lived experience from individuals engaged in the evolution of the Seattle areas arts sector was seen as time critical.

Community Advisors also spoke to the personal value of working on AERP. This project provides well-respected members of the Seattle art’s community the opportunity to work together to assist in the preservation of the local art and cultural history. One Advisor described the satisfaction of being a participant in a project that will continue to grow over time, and the importance of encouraging a process that can “acknowledge the contributions of others who came before us” (V. Phillips, personal communication, October 9, 2018).

All the Advisors noted the need for flexibility in developing and building AERP, and the value of acknowledging that hindsight is 20/20. They pointed out that it is essential that a project such as AERP be viewed as a process in which there will be constant discovery and response. Challenges emerged, as expected for an experimental process. Advisors identified two primary areas of challenge the first year: managing community expectations and securing adequate project resources within and beyond the university. These two challenges continued to be central in years two and three, with the emergence of an additional challenge: maintaining writing and research standards with student work to be presented on a public platform.

Managing Community Expectation

A project of this scope and potential quickly begins to bear the pressures of being “all things to all people” (K. Maifeld, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Arts community members are hungry for this information and they want it immediately, accurately, and comprehensively. It is important to promote realistic expectations, and frame the long view, while encouraging buy in from relevant communities and individual stakeholders. Within the university community it is important to identify departmental expectations and strategic goals that align with the project, and make sure that lines of communication are open and active. Leadership of regional arts agencies and organizations must also be communicated with regularly to help shape and manage the community dimension of AERP.

Providing Adequate Project Resources

AERP staffing and funding needs quickly evolved beyond those of a regular class, requiring support from local arts agencies, institutional support, and individual stakeholders. The project has relied heavily on pro bono work by the Instructor and Advisors. Advisors noted the that the first year made evident the need for more staffing resources to be allocated to

successfully oversee the project. They also emphasized the need for identifying and securing funding, and making sure that proper organizational structures are in place so that funding can be accessed. The complexities of university funding channels must be navigated, and ultimately the university and the community must have clear pathways and commitment to support such a project. The University Library's role in AERP was acknowledged as growing quickly in unexpected ways, and Advisors noted that this dedication of additional resources solidified the Library's pivotal role in AERP.

Writing and Research Standards for a Public Project

A key challenge emerged regarding the ten-week quarter system and conducting applied research. In-depth interviews, secondary research and construction of coherent and compelling case studies were essential components for completion of publication-quality material. The time constraint was evident in efforts to identify, schedule, and conduct interviews, limiting time for analysis and iterative research. MFA students' varied academic research and writing capabilities resulted in disparate quality among the cases studies. Maintaining rigorous standards and the importance of setting such standards for a publicly accessible project were of strong concern to project leadership. The broad range of student research and writing skills resulted in case studies that required significantly more professional editing than expected to reach uniform standards encouraged by the Advisors, and desired for the project over time.

Community Advisors and the Instructor reviewed the case studies and student feedback from years two and three to assess future frameworks and directions. Narrower parameters for case study research as well as predetermined options for potential interviewees were seen as likely to enhance the quality and consistency of case studies, and improve the student experience. Steps were identified to streamline the research process for future students.

Despite these challenges, the case studies resulted in valuable research and community benefit. One of the individuals interviewed felt moved to note how well a student was able to carefully document a tumultuous time in the selected organization, and that AERP overall is capturing "... the value of the work we did and the work that continues to this day. Many of the projects listed no longer exist...this also documents a very important time in the history of Seattle" (S. Nagel, personal communication, April 20, 2020).

Project resources were of concern all three years, with significant reliance on pro bono work for project management. Core support in the department was in the form of compensation for teaching the applied research seminar. There continued to be strong staff support from the Library for student research literacy, and development and maintenance of the website and the institutional repository. Interest and encouragement came from other parts of the university, but funding was limited to one quarter of graduate assistant support. Efforts were made to identify regional and national grant funding for AERP. Inquiries determined that the project's goals and iterative design did not fall within many grant guidelines and that the grant applications required development staff services that were not available. Despite cornerstone support by a regional arts agency, accessing funding for project management, honoraria, student stipends, and editorial functions remained a challenge. The post-pandemic environment is likely to require increasingly creative approaches to support within academia, as well as from the public sector, or other sources.

Moving Forward

The initial years of AERP and the applied research seminar resulted in a number of changes at the departmental level and instigated conversations that opened new doors within the university and beyond.

The success in meeting academic learning goals in the first year of the seminar led to consideration for making the seminar a required graduate class within the MFA in Arts Leadership curriculum. The more immediate result was an increased emphasis on research skills throughout the MFA program's curriculum. The department embraced the project as a unique and valuable component of the graduate student experience. The College of Arts and Sciences also acknowledged AERP as a strong example of intertwining academic and community benefit, as well as an important collaboration between the Library and an academic department. There is interest in how AERP can help distinguish the arts management graduate program from other similar programs nationally.

The University's Library dedicated significant resources to the project, both in the form of traditional library support and in ways that expanded the role of the Library. The Library supported student learning and research by teaching students how to perform archival research, locate historical documents, and learn about different research methods. It informed collection development activities with the identification and acquisition of new resources to support student research. New partnerships were developed with the local public library and museums to highlight and increase access to archival and special collections. By collaborating with AERP the Library had an opportunity to further develop its roles as partners in the research cycle.

This project also serves as a model for the University Library to expand its value to the academic and larger community, building on its mission to promote discovery and access. ScholarWorks represents the Library's commitment to share the intellectual work of faculty, staff, and students, along with archival items and unique holdings, with the broader community. The creation and use of digital technologies further redefine its role. Devoting Library staffs' technical expertise in the creation of digital projects has created new ways for the Library to

connect with the community by disseminating the scholarship produced, and to play a key role in the preservation of Seattle's cultural sector ecosystem.

Relationships with regional arts agencies, funders, and repositories continue to be explored, and suggest many fruitful directions. Seattle's Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) has indicated interest in convening representatives of regional archives and repositories. The focus would be the development of an integrated approach to handling physical archives that may surface through AERP student research and to identify options to preserve such arts and culture materials. Seattle Public Library's Special Collections has been a stalwart partner in supporting student AERP research and the project has encouraged their collection of more arts-relevant materials.

Students encountered deep and sincere enthusiasm from the individuals they interviewed and surveyed. Advisors and the Instructor report encountering continued curiosity and support for the project among members of the arts community. This bodes well for subsequent efforts at data collection. Such a project is impossible without the goodwill and generosity of the individuals who hold the knowledge and experiences being researched. Capturing the lived experiences, accomplishments and lessons of the past is acknowledged as a benefit to the community, as is the capacity of such research to inform new endeavors in the sector in coming years. AERP provides an overarching story of ecosystem change, innovation, and creativity as well as inspiration and cautionary tales regarding specific arts and culture endeavors.

The advent of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic exposed the fragility of the arts and culture sector. There is new urgency in documenting and understanding arts and culture ecosystems as unprecedented social, cultural, and economic change results from this period. New conversations

can explore how the Arts Ecosystem Research Project and its online platform may best serve the sector and the larger community in new and unexpected conditions.

AERP has built a foundation for continued research, capturing the knowledge and heritage essential to understanding the accomplishments of the regional arts sector and providing insights to inform the future. The AERP timeline, repository, and website now exist as a digital platform that can continue to grow and change to reflect instructional and community needs, interests, capacities, and resources. Myriad possibilities are evident to build this effort over time with the engagement of students and the greater community in Seattle. The AERP initiative can inform other universities and communities that seek to link an academic research project in the arts to the local arts sector and its needs.

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