

Thriving Arts : Thriving Small Communities



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February, 2006: The Headlight-Herald, Tracy, Minnesota, reports the community meeting only dreamed of in many towns across Minnesota and in fact across the nation: arts enthusiasts supporting sports, sports enthusiasts supporting the arts, and all rallying around a strong future for their community.

The plan calls for the marriage of athletics and fine arts. Those who learned more about it Monday felt it was a plan worthy of applause. . . . Preliminary facility plans include a 500-seat theater, 1,800-seat gymnasium, wrestling room, locker rooms, weight room, storage rooms, large entry with concessions, and bathrooms. Early, rough cost estimates have been in the \$5 million range. The tone of the forum was overwhelmingly positive, with all who took the opportunity to speak in favor of such a facility. Proponents from both the athletics and fine arts standpoints spoke in support of the project.

Keith Stanton spoke first, reading a letter in support of the facility. “There is no question that the physical education facilities need extensive upgrading. Inclusion of a theater is a logical extension,” he said. “In this day when schools must compete for students, it makes sense that we offer the best possible programs and facilities for them.” Marge Robinson, president of the Fine Arts Council of Tracy, spoke on the success of the arts in Tracy. . . . She said a theater facility would greatly enhance the already strong arts in Tracy.

Susan Kluge, who has directed high school theater productions over the past two years, said that while her focus is in theater, she understands that athletic programs need more space also. “It’s almost impossible to carry on a rehearsal when there are volleyball players practicing,” she said. “It’s fine to start out in a smaller area to practice, but once sets and props are added to the equation, more space is needed. “We end up fighting for space,” she said. Ade Miller, a teacher and director of several musicals within the community, said she was pleased with the size of the facility that is being considered. Others who have built theaters, she said, have later regretted not having enough seating. The theater should be able to seat at least the student body and staff, she recommended. “Please don’t go small if you’re going to build a theater,” she said.

Board member Chris Schons . . . said some events put on by the arts council have drawn 650-700 people. Miller said the annual Christmas concert draws 800-1,000. Miller also encouraged the board to be generous with storage space, and not assume that the wings of a theater are enough. Vocal music instructor Shirlee Gilmore expressed her support of the project, as well as gratefulness. When she is preparing for a concert, she said, physical education classes have generously given up their class time to allow for practice in the gym.

Teacher and coach Brian Michelson told the board that . . . “It would be really nice to have an extra facility—a nice facility for people to sit down and watch a play or a concert. I’m behind this 110%.” Another teacher and coach, Nat Boyer, also expressed his support. “The development of the arts here has been great,” he said. “We end up interfering with their practices. . . . I support all facets of this. Of course my priority is a gym, but I believe a theater and auditorium is important as well,” he said. “Getting up to par with other schools of Tracy’s size, he said, will help attract students and programs.”

Chris Schmidt, a Tracy graduate who moved back to Tracy to raise his family. . . . “I don’t see a down side to this,” he said. “It’s a win-win for everyone.”

Retired teacher Jesse James, who has also been involved with many theater productions, said a lack of adequate arts and athletics facilities at Tracy Area High School is limiting students. There was a time, he said, when he never would have encouraged a student to go into entertainment or athletics. Now, he said, there are many careers associated with these fields that are open to students. Without adequate arts and athletics facilities, he said, the school cannot expose students to those potential careers. “I know you want what’s best for our students,” James said to the board. “We have to give them the means to be successful.”

“The first thing people ask is, ‘Where’s the money?’” he said, “but it’s not just what it will cost. It’s what it will do for the whole community. A fine arts and athletic facility,” he said, “will bring people to Tracy businesses, and attract people to town. We need the best to attract families here.”

Thriving Arts : Thriving Small Communities

Tracy, Minnesota, with a stable population of 2,128, is an agricultural community in Southwestern Minnesota. Tracy has a well-established sense of settled-ness—of belonging within the prairie. Incorporated in 1870, the community is best known as a railroad center for the Midwest breadbasket. That legacy lives on through the annual Labor Day Box Car Days community festival and the Wheels Across the Prairie Museum. Tracy lies just west of Walnut Grove and Plum Creek, home to Laura Ingalls Wilder, whose *Little House on the Prairie* is commemorated in both museum and annual pageant.

Despite its rural roots as an agricultural community built by the hard work of immigrants largely of German, Norwegian, Irish, and Swedish ancestry, it is a community that continues to grow and change with the times. Today, the number of Hmong and Hispanic citizens is on the rise. They, along with other cultural and ethnic groups, comprise 13% of the community. In the elementary school, 27% of the student body has limited English proficiency. As a significantly ethnically diverse community in Greater Minnesota, it works hard to be welcoming of these newcomers, through its civic leadership, its school leadership, its ecumenical council, and its arts programming.

The arts are remarkably strong in this small community. Through the efforts of the well-established Fine Arts Council of Tracy (FACT), there are a number of sponsored arts events that celebrate community: community-wide theater productions, community festivals, ecumenical choral events, showcasing of Hmong culture. In addition, FACT hosts a broad range of other activities from visual arts displays to musical performances, touring groups, arts in the afternoon, poetry readings, and trips to attend arts events in other communities.

Why is Tracy, Minnesota such an active center for arts and culture, when other small rural communities struggle to preserve artistic or cultural expression?

THE STUDY

In 2004-05, the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council, with support from the Bush Foundation, set out to find those factors that make Tracy, Minnesota, among other small communities, a fine example of community arts development. Field research was conducted to answer the question “*Are there critical ingredients or common themes necessary to build long-term vitality for the arts in rural and ‘suburban fringe’ communities?*” The study hoped to uncover factors or conditions under which a thriving and sustainable arts sector might develop in small communities; and through this work inform future investment toward the nurture of small town community arts.

Ten communities with population from 1,000 to 6,000 residents (2000 census) were selected for study. The communities were chosen by Regional Arts Council directors purposively based on impressions that some communities appeared to have more arts activity than others, and to offer a range of experience to analyze. Five communities selected were ‘outlying suburban’ and five were clearly rural—again to offer comparison and a range. Extensive interviews, news scans, and observations were made over a year in each community. In addition, there was an extensive literature review. [Note: for a complete reporting of the study, see Shifferd, 2006]

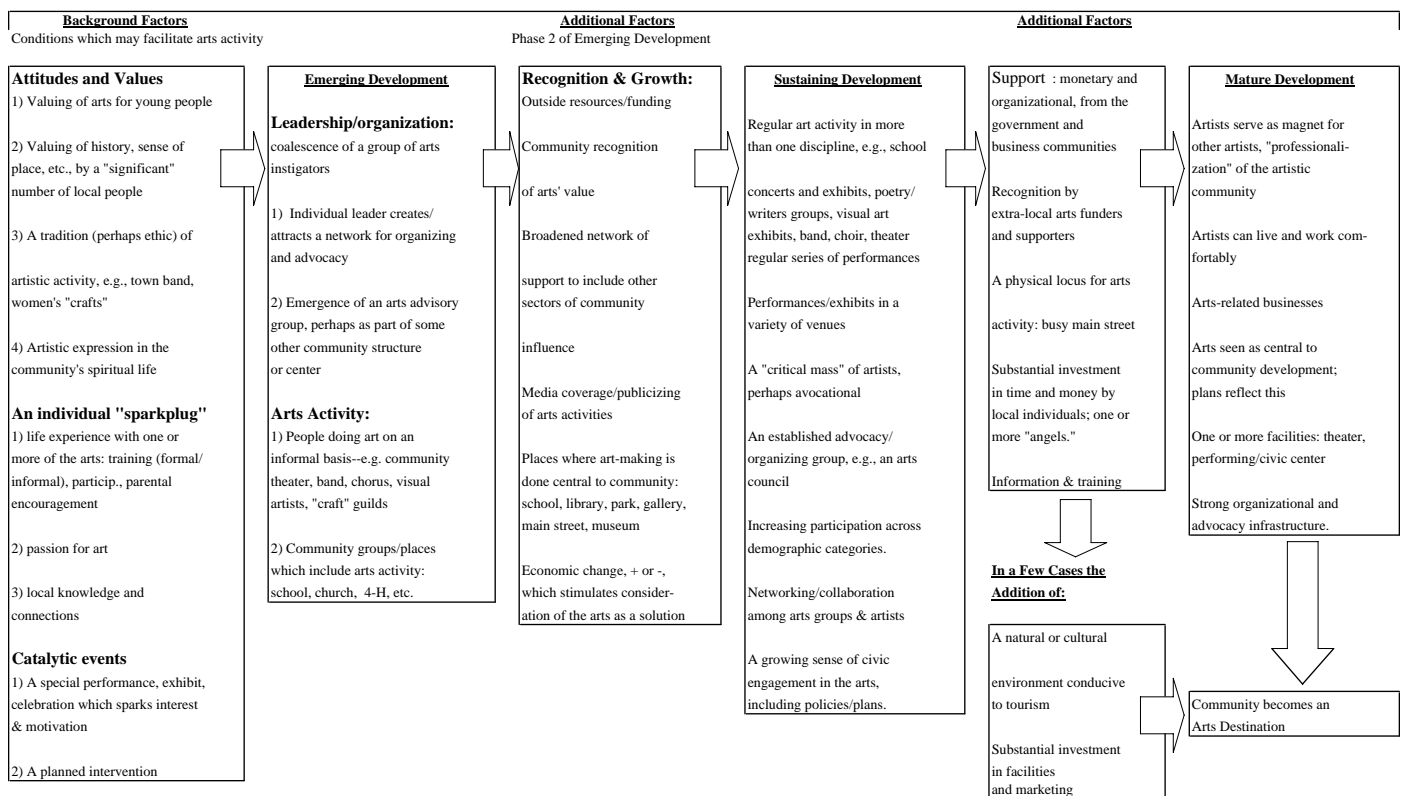
The unit of analysis in the study was the community, not the individual artist or arts organization. The study sought to understand how arts activities affect, and are affected by, other aspects of community life. To guide the research process, a set of assumptions was developed, as follows:

- There are identifiable and measurable pre-conditions that can increase the potential for cultural development in communities;
- Certain activities or events can significantly increase the level and depth of cultural development in communities;
- There are circumstances and conditions that promote the sustained development of arts active communities;
- The ecology of leadership can be a significant factor in the advancement of community cultural development; and
- Under certain conditions, the arts and culture sector can make a measurable contribution to community development initiatives and the creation of social capital.

These orienting assumptions, together with the shared experiences of the consulting team¹, led to the development of a logic model to transform the questions into a hypothesized process of community artistic development. Two sets of variables were identified: 1) the characteristics of the arts sector itself, and 2) the characteristics of the larger community structure in which the arts sector is found. The model is shown as Table 1.

Table 1

What makes the arts thrive in (rural/small) towns? Hypothesized connections



Three levels of artistic development are shown: emerging, sustaining, and mature. The hypothesized characteristics of each of these levels can be found in boxes 2, 4, and 6, reading from left to right on the table. For example, Emerging Development is defined by the emergence of a leadership group and by the existence of a variety of informal arts activities that people can participate in.

- **Background Factors:** Attitudes and values, individual “sparkplug,” catalytic events
↓
- **Emerging Development:** Leadership coalescence, some shared arts activity
↓
- **Sustaining Development:** Broadening networking and collaboration, regular arts activity in multiple disciplines, civic engagement, “critical mass” of artists, established arts advocacy group
↓
- **Mature Development:** Arts central to community development, organizational infrastructure, one or more facilities, artists and arts-related businesses in place. A special case of mature development, an arts destination community, is suggested in the lower right hand corner of the model. Although the purpose of this study is not to study such communities, a thorough model of artistic development should take account of this possibility.

The intervening sections of the model (boxes 1, 3, and 5 left to right) describe the aspects of the larger community necessary to increasingly integrate the arts into the broader structures of town life. For example, baseline attitudes and values that seem to be necessary to provide a fertile field for artistic development include valuing the arts in school and church, as well as some degree of community solidarity reflected in a sense of place and of community history.

The logic model created a theoretical proposition of how arts and culture sectors in communities are thought to develop. It suggests a framework to track the development of the arts and culture sector in a community over time, and also clusters of factors that may be found together. As a qualitative approach, the logic model offers a context for understanding a process, and not a causal model of cultural development.

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature provided three generalizations:

- There is widespread recognition of the potential for arts and cultural activity to contribute to community building. In our quantitative world, there is much literature available on the utilitarian benefit of the arts in community-building and economic development. This leads to an emphasis on communities utilizing arts to create “destinations,” “tourism” features, and as tools for the economy.
- There is a great deal of literature that deals with individual participation in creative activity in a community.
- The above two types of literature, however, are predicated on the arts activity and arts organizations that already exist in a community. Little or no published material deals directly with the questions of this study; specifically, under what conditions does a thriving

and sustainable arts sector develop in small communities in rural and suburban fringe areas? This exploration most closely resonates with the nurture of the intrinsic value of the arts.

It is significant that the logic model unfolds from recognition of the intrinsic value of the arts. A useful organizing tool through which to frame this discussion is offered by Kevin McCarthy et al, in the *Gifts of the Muse*. This tool suggests that the values of the arts flow from private/personal benefits toward public benefits. It further suggests both intrinsic and instrumental values of the arts – arts as an end in themselves (intrinsic), and arts as utilitarian means to other societal ends (instrumental). The model is shown as Table 2.

Table 2¹

↓ Intrinsic Benefits ↓		
Captivation and pleasure— personal development	Expanded capacity for empathy and cognitive growth	Creation of social bonds, expression of communal meaning
Private benefits	Private benefits with public spillover	Public benefits
Improved test scores— arts and learning	Improved self-efficacy, learning skills, health	Development of social capital and economic growth
↑ Instrumental Benefits ↑		

In relationship to the present discussion, our work would suggest that the intrinsic values of the arts—from personal to public—underlie and must be nurtured before the instrumental values can be realized. A brief overview of the McCarthy model follows, including introductory glimpses into significant research studies that correlate with each of the three areas of intrinsic value and the three areas of instrumental value.

1. Intrinsic Value of the Arts

a. *Personal Development*

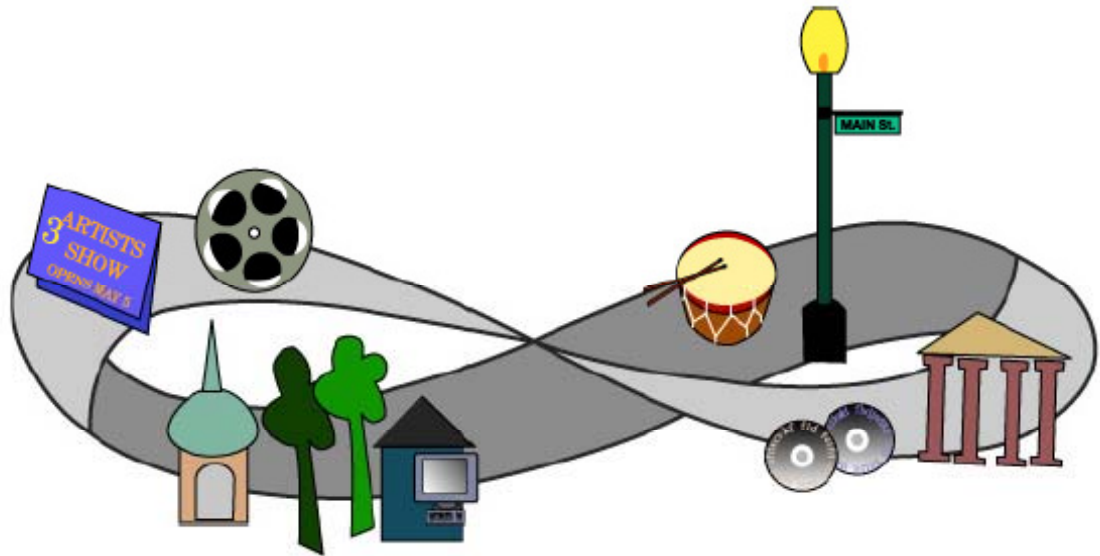
It begins with the value of the arts as fundamental to our humanness. We all have the passion to create, to be captivated, to find pleasure in beauty and aesthetic expression. Art at its root enriches our lives. It taps our emotions, bypasses the intellect and becomes the “shorthand” to the soul. As Pablo Picasso said, “Art washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life.” People are drawn to the arts first and foremost for its own sake—for meaning and expression. People are drawn out of the recognition that artistic expression simply enhances life, offering opportunities that transcend our utilitarian lives.

b. *Expanded capacity for empathy; cognitive growth.*

As the model moves into the mid range of private to public intrinsic values of the arts, the model explores the capacity of individuals to connect with the world about them. “The arts expand individuals’ capacities for empathy by drawing them into the experiences of people vastly different from them and cultures vastly different from their

¹ McCarthy, Kevin F., Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, Arthur Brooks. *Gifts of the Muse*.

own. . . . The intrinsic benefits . . . all have cognitive dimensions. When individuals focus their attention on a work of art, they are ‘invited’ to make sense of what is before them. Because meanings are embedded in the experience rather than explicitly stated, the individual can gain an entirely new perspective on the world and how he or she perceives it.” (p. xvi) The arts offer the personal experiences capable of expanding or transforming one’s worldview.



The work of Alaka Wali and her colleagues at Columbia College, Chicago, is also significant in this area, offering insight into the intrinsic value of the arts.² Their work highlights the continuum of arts work from that which occurs in informal and frequently unstructured places to those that are tied to long-established, formally organized cultural institutions. The work found compelling evidence that through participation in informal arts:

- Communities Bond. People come together with like interests for personal expression and creativity;
- Communities Bridge Differences. People come together across such social boundaries as economic status, ethnicity and race, age and geography;
- Communities Build Capacity. In the process, individual and community assets are built, by fostering social inclinations and skills critical to civic renewal.

The work highlights the importance of the informal arts in the overall arts “ecosystem.” Informal arts make a contribution to the fabric of the community that institutions cannot. Furthermore, informal and community-based arts are typically the entry point for most individuals into participation in the arts.

The arts also make a significant contribution to restoring a sense of place and of connection in a changing world. In a time of enormous social and economic change, life in small communities simply “isn’t what it used to be.” Patrick Overton, in his work

² Wali, Alaka, Rebecca Severson, Mario Longoni. “The Informal Arts”

Rebuilding the Front Porch of America reminds us that “We are losing our front porch. We are losing our gathering place. It is being replaced with decks in the back yard and contemporary architecture dominated by the garage Our culture is slowly ‘disintegrating.’” In the midst of this upheaval, his work reminds us “We help people make art. And, in the process, we help people make community.” (p. xx) Through the informal and community-based arts we strengthen our sense of rootedness, our sense of attachment to or belonging within our “homeplace,” our community.

c. *Creation of social bonds; expression of communal meaning.*

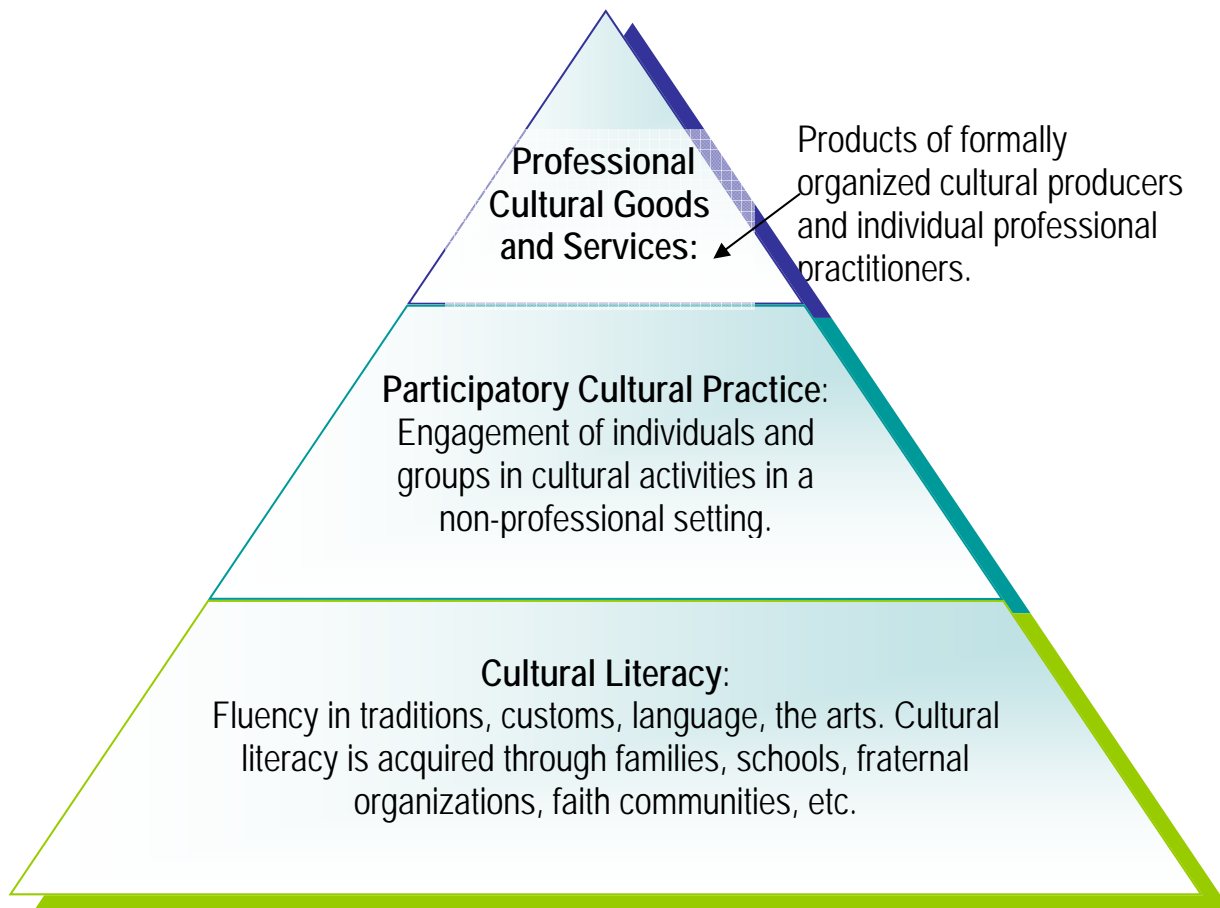
Finally, as the model moves into the realm of public intrinsic values of the arts, the model highlights the collective effects of the arts in the creation of social bonds and communal meanings. Cultural Initiatives, Silicon Valley, report significant value of the arts in the shaping of the creative community. “Examples of what can produce these benefits are art that commemorate events significant to a nation’s history or a community’s identity, art that provides a voice to communities that the culture at large has largely ignored, and art that critiques the culture for the express purpose of changing people’s views.” (p. xvi)

The work reinforced other studies in stating:

- Creativity is fundamental: everyone has the ability to be creative;
- Creativity is both individual and collaborative: creating and sharing art is an inherently public and social experience;
- Creativity is influenced by place: the qualities of place can affect the creative capacity of individuals to realize their creative potential;
- Cultural participation builds social capital: it builds a more cohesive, connected community;
- Cultural participation connects people to place: by building a sense of belonging, it builds connection to place;
- Cultural participation develops creative capacities: it plays a critical role in the personal growth of both youths and adults.

Of greatest significance to the present study, the Silicon Valley work identifies a pyramid of keys to a creative community. The model is shown in Table 3. This pyramid again highlights the paramount importance of informal arts, as well as early exposure to the arts, as the solid foundation upon which the arts infrastructure is built. Much in the manner that the Rand Study in Arts Participation recognizes the importance of social/cultural identity and past experiences in creating the backdrop for future arts participation, this model also recognizes the importance of early experiences and community-based experiences in the arts as well as arts in education as necessary foundations to an arts active community.

Table 3³



2. The other side of the model: the Instrumental Value of the Arts

a. *Improved test scores—arts and learning*

While there is a great deal of literature documenting the value of arts in learning and cognition, it is not within the scope of this study to discuss arts and education. Suffice it to say for this context that, in the area of arts in education, there is much research that documents the value of the arts in improving basic academic skills – such as reading and math – as well as the capacity for critical and creative thinking, through engagement in

³ Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, “Creative Community Index: Measuring Progress”

the arts, and especially through arts integration into core curriculum. In addition to supporting basic academic skills, the arts contribute significantly to developing “whole persons.” The U.S. Department of Education lists the arts as subjects that college-bound middle and junior high school students should take, stating “Many colleges view participation in the arts and music as a valuable experience that broadens students’ understanding and appreciation of the world around them. It is also well known and widely recognized that the arts contribute significantly to children’s intellectual development.” In the present context, this work again emphasizes the need for cultivation of cultural literacy at a young age.

b. *Improved self-efficacy, learning skills, health*

Again, particularly focusing on students and youth, the literature documents the value of the arts in instilling self-discipline, teamwork, improved mental and physical health, as well as greater civic engagement. All of these benefits have instrumental effects that move into the mid-range of spillover benefits to the broader society, as well as positive impact on the individual.

Mark J. Stern and Susan Seifert, in their Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) at the University of Pennsylvania provide valuable insight into the social impact of the arts, both in the area of personal growth as a citizen as well as documented value to the public. The work found two social impacts of the arts:

- Increasing collective efficacy: cultural participation makes residents more willing to become involved in other issues in their community;
- Building bridges across long-standing divides of ethnicity and social class: because cultural participants travel across the city, they build links between neighborhoods that have very few connections to one another.

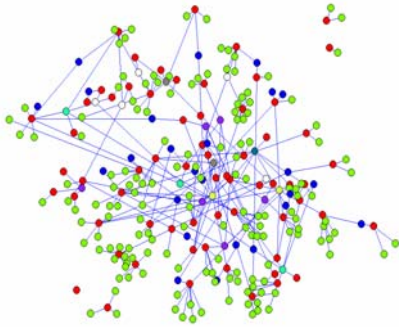
Of greatest significance to the present study, the work discusses community arts as “weak organizations” with strong social impact. The study suggests the need to understand cultural community-based organizations more as “social movements” than as classically modeled formal organizations. Understanding these groups in this way provides insight into their activities and also explains their effectiveness. Stern and Seifert refer to community-based arts organizations as the “irrational” solution. They are:

1. Driven by an ‘irrational’ commitment to mission;
2. Linked to a community’s search for identity;
3. Opportunistic and nimble;
4. Able to scan their environment;
5. Resilient in the face of inevitable crises;
6. And have strength that comes from social networks, not organizational structure.

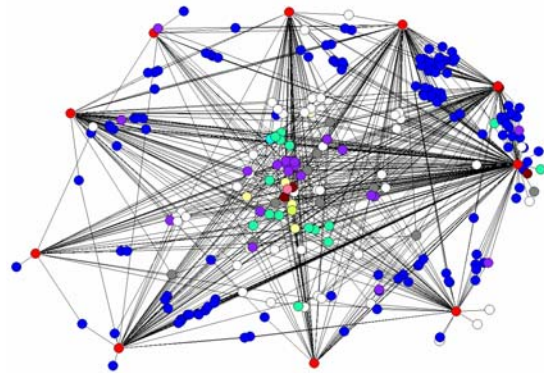
Strength as a social movement—through the social networks created and maintained by the arts—sums up for Stern and Seifert the value of community arts.⁴ Although from a traditional institutional yardstick, many community-based arts organizations would be

⁴ Stern, Mark J. and Susan Seifert. Working Papers.

Sixty community artists and their professional contacts over one year



Ten community cultural organizations and the institutions with which they maintained contact over one year



viewed as “diffuse,” decentralized or nonhierarchical groups, or “weak” organizationally, their value is documented by Stern/Seifert as follows:

1. They span social class and economic function;
2. They are not connected to an overarching ideology;
3. They invite blurred relationships between the individual and the collective;
4. They connect to personal aspects of life.

Stern and Seifert conclude that community based arts organizations should be viewed by the strength of the networks they generate and the impacts they have on their communities, not their organizational performance. Stern/Seifert graphically document the networks they found as represented in the diagrams above, expressing visually the power of the “weak” organization, functioning as a social movement, in building social networks across the community. Their “irrational organization” model argues strenuously against the notion that there is one model for how a community arts organization should develop. There is no one yardstick for guiding or measuring development. Each community will build its network based on its own community assets. Arts-based social networks are important instrumentally to building a strong community of individual artists and arts appreciators, as well as a strongly networked community.

c. *Development of social capital; economic growth*

Finally, as the model moves into the realm of public instrumental values, it highlights the collective value of the arts as a net contributor to the economic development of communities, the creation of both a strong community identity, and the building of community organizational capacity and civic commitment.

The previously mentioned SIAP and Silicon Valley studies document the development of social capital through the arts. Another important work that describes the path of instrumental value of the arts from private to public benefit is the contribution of Ann Markusen and her work on artist centers. She highlights that artist centers are important

in the development of a distinctive regional culture, as well as on the cultural economy of a community. She emphasizes that such centers offer a place for “learning, sharing, networking, and exposure not offered elsewhere in the regional arts ecology.” She further documents the impact of artist centers:

- On artists: at all career levels, artists meet and interact with other artists, furthering the quality of their work, and reaching audiences and artists;
- On neighborhoods: art centers contribute to the vitality and safety of their neighborhoods;
- On economies: art centers make important contributions to the regional economy and to the social, cultural, and commercial lives of their neighbors.

In sum, the review of the literature confirmed the need for understanding both (a) paths to once again honoring/elevating the intrinsic value of the arts, and (b) paths to a thriving and sustainable arts sector in small communities, and (c) the cautionary reminder that while there may be some generalizations to be made regarding factors found in common at each developmental stage within the model, each community will evolve in its own way based on its particular community assets and drivers.

THE FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

Table 4: The Ten Towns and the Logic Model: this table categorizes each of the communities showing the presence of factors associated with each stage of cultural development

Background Factors	Emerging Development	Sustaining Development	Mature Development
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A valuing of history, sense of place, by a significant number of local people • Artistic expression in the community’s spiritual life • Ecumenicism among the faith communities with some indication of openness to cultural diversity • Value of exposure and/or engagement of young people in the arts • A planned intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership is in place that is able to coalesce arts “instigators” • Empowering leadership • A broadening network of support that includes other sectors of community influence • A variety of people are engaged in informal or community-based arts activities, held in a variety of venues • Most valuable activities are “recurrent” in nature – developing social bonds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An established advocacy/ organizing group such as an arts council • Recognition of the value of the arts and monetary and/or organizational support from civic and business leaders • Arts are regularly reported, and valued by the media • Growing public awareness of the arts and regular activity in several disciplines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artists serve as a magnet for other artists, there is professionalization of the artistic community • Growth in arts-related businesses • Arts are seen as central to community development, as reflected in economic plans • There are one or more facilities, spaces dedicated to the arts
Belle Plaine Forest Lake Granite Falls			
	Jordan Onamia Plainview St. Francis		
		Harmony Tracy Watertown-Mayer	
			None identified in this study

Background conditions and factors characteristic of the 3-stage continuum of community cultural development

Where study communities fell on the cultural development continuum

While the research report (Shifferd, 2006) provides a detailed analysis of the findings, Table 4 summarizes the findings from the year of investigation as applied to the logic model. The model was found to be a useful tool for comparison, and retains its original hypothetical value as a theoretical framework for understanding the process of artistic development in small towns, as well as a framework for formulating strategy and/or initiatives to build a community's arts vitality. The factors listed at each of the four levels (background, emerging, sustaining and mature) offer a useful generalization of both predictors of advancement as well as informing areas of infrastructure development, training and other investments that could be made at each stage of development. As a generalization, in the most arts-active communities (those achieving the stage of sustained development):

1. Leaders/supporters are connected into larger community networks;
2. A critical mass of leadership/support exists, not just one or two individuals;
3. Leaders establish coalitions with other community groups;
4. An established group for arts advocacy and planning exists and gives voice;
5. The arts are seen by key non-arts leaders as essential to community well-being;
6. Arts activity and participation is intentionally inclusive: of all ages and social groups;
7. Key community festivals include arts activities;
8. All forms of creative expression are honored, both formal and informal;
9. Participation is encouraged;
10. A minority of these communities sees the arts also as an amenity to attract visitors.

Certain environmental factors are supportive of cultural development. The communities with an emerging arts presence

1. Are distinguished by a greater value placed on history and sense of place. Most communities showed this to some degree; however, it was evident that informants in the more arts active communities were more likely to volunteer place and history factors when asked what people in their community are proud of most;
2. Exhibit ecumenicalism among faith communities and some openness to cultural diversity;
3. Have informal arts activities in various venues; emphasize participatory projects;
4. Have leadership capable of organizing a group of arts supporters.

The most arts active communities surveyed (including Tracy, Minnesota) are only now approaching the sustaining level of development. They are characterized by:

1. An established group for arts advocacy and planning;
2. Leadership that establishes coalitions with other community groups;
3. Leadership and supporters that are connected into larger community networks;
4. A critical mass of leadership/support exists, not just one or two individuals;
5. Growing awareness of and pride in artists and art work in the community;
6. The arts valued by key non-arts leaders as essential to community well being;
7. Arts activity that is intentionally inclusive of all ages and socio-cultural groups;
8. Extensive media coverage;
9. Key community festivals that include arts activities.

How does Tracy, Minnesota measure against these factors?

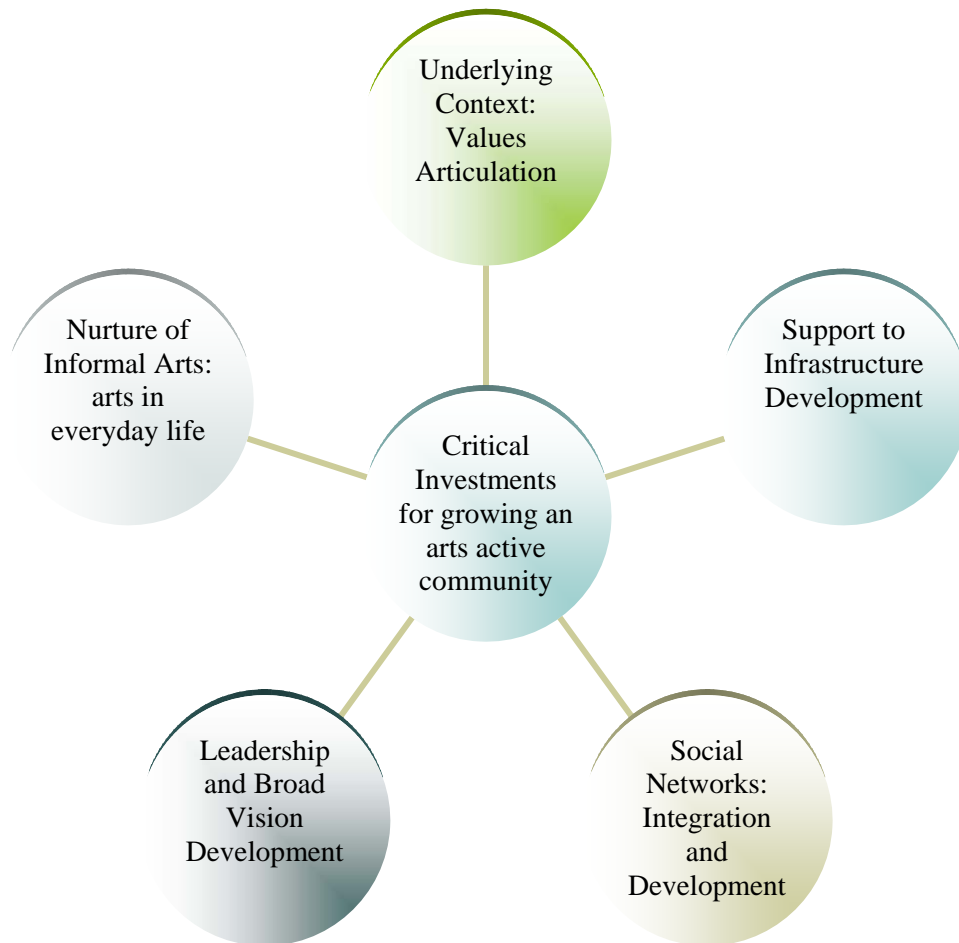
Background	Emerging	Sustaining	Mature
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sense of Place: Strong sense of history and place; railroad history; small-town feel very strong • Ecumenicism: Yearly ecumenical “Celebration in Song” joint concert of churches • Openness: Significant work with Hmong community • Engagement of Young People: Tradition of high quality performance for youth through school and activities of fine arts council. Cultural literacy is valued. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Artists: Few professional artists; civic pride in local talent • Arts Leadership: Arts leadership long-term, diverse, well-connected • Arts Vision: Encouragement of wide participation; enhancement of local quality of life; pride in local creativity • Arts Activities: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participatory Arts activity expected and valued • Community band • Intergenerational community musicals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arts Council: Established arts council provides various programs featuring local talent throughout the year • Media Coverage of Arts: Good media coverage • Arts and Community Development: Visual arts exhibited in bank and local business, but little articulated sense of the arts as important to economic development 	<p>Barriers to moving toward mature development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • need articulated sense of the arts as important to economic development • no performance space; • volunteer nature of arts council and supporters; • no critical mass of professional artists; • arts orientation quite local, no attraction of outside resources; • level to slightly declining population requires use of available resources to maintain infrastructure

IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE FIELD

To the field of those agencies interested in funding and nurturing healthy communities and a vibrant future for the arts, the best summary of the work is “fund the foundation of the pyramid!” Support our smaller communities in their efforts to build cultural literacy, participatory arts and infrastructure for a thriving cultural future. Assist these communities in establishing a context for the arts within their community, a language and tools for articulating the intrinsic as well as instrumental value of the arts, as well as the confidence and skills as leaders to move forward.

The study identified five key ingredients to growing an arts active community. Each is discussed below:

1. Underlying social context: attitudes and values that are grounded in acceptance of differences, in a welcoming openness, and a grounded pride of place
2. Informal arts: a valuing of arts in everyday life
3. Leadership with a broad vision for cultural development and an empowering, facilitative style
4. Social networks: integration into the larger structures of community life
5. Support to infrastructure development



1. Underlying Social Context: Attitudes and values that are grounded in acceptance of differences, in a welcoming openness, and a grounded pride of place

The study highlights that the size of the community is not positively associated with the vibrancy of the arts sector. Some very small towns, like Tracy, are quite arts active. One does not need to live in a big town or urban center to have access to and participate in arts activities. These activities generate tremendous pride in many cases, they encourage broad participation and bring people together across social categories, and they challenge participants and audiences organizationally and thematically. This study confirms the observations made by Brown (*Authentic Passion*) about the arts in rural communities: the experience of arts participation in small towns stems from and reinforces people's commitment to the value of creativity and the challenge of creating something of beauty.

Belle Plaine, Minnesota. Located an hour's commute south of the urban core, this rural community of 5,000 has grown by almost 40% in the past five years. In the midst of this dramatic growth, Belle Plaine has maintained its core assets of strong arts programming in the schools, local city officials committed to preservation of historic downtown, and a foundation of arts through a community theater and a summer Arts in the Park program. A few years ago, there was a "sparkplug" event, when Metropolitan Regional Arts Council funding enabled Rolling Plains, a touring art exhibit, housed in a semi-trailer. However, this was ineffective in sparking long-term arts development in the absence of well-coalesced leadership for the arts. Since that time, some of the most active arts supporters have moved away. Those that remain to make the arts happen are relatively few. Belle Plaine is recognizing that its current critical investments for the arts lie in restoring the community's social context – the pride of place and cohesiveness of community bridging the long term residents with their sense of rootedness, with the newcomers—utilizing the arts in rebuilding and shaping a new pride of place.

Recommendation 1

Encourage the strengthening of sense of place and history through the arts

There are many ways this might be done. Here are five ideas:

1. Establish a festival fund to award grants to communities that wish to include one or more arts disciplines in special commemorative events designed to celebrate their history, landscape, and/or hopes for the future.
2. Provide incentives for local arts supporters to establish collaborative projects with environmental groups, historical societies, museums, etc.
3. Encourage the preservation and public appreciation of local ethnic traditions through exhibits, workshops, oral histories, etc. These efforts should be inclusive of all groups and celebrate the diversity they represent.
4. Encourage activities that develop cultural literacy at an early age.
5. Facilitate the conversation about the value of the arts. Offer communities the tools and the opportunities to develop language to articulate the local value of the arts. Shift the norm toward a recognition of the arts intrinsically, as well as instrumentally, in relationship to helping healthy, balanced individuals and communities. This can be

stated no better than Kevin McCarthy’s recommendation to the field in the *Gifts of the Muse* (p. xviii): “The arts community will need to develop language to describe the various ways that the arts create benefits at both the private and the public level. The greatest challenge will be to bring the policy community to explicitly recognize the importance of intrinsic benefits. This will require an effort to raise awareness about the need to look beyond quantifiable results and examine qualitative issues.”

2. Informal and community-based arts—a valuing of arts in everyday life

Work that validates and builds upon the informal arts is work that will expand the base of participation in the arts. As the entry point for most individuals, recurring activities such as community choirs, bands, and youth “garage bands” are invaluable in instilling arts appreciation and lifelong artistic expression. This work again highlighted the importance of the informal arts in the overall arts “ecosystem.”

In addition, a special arts event—a touring exhibit, an artist residency, a special community festival, for example—can provide the stimulus for further innovation and development in the art sector. However, such stimuli are by no means automatic. The beneficial effects of such events depend on the willingness and ability of an arts leadership group to carry the idea forward. A fertile field of potential support must exist for such seeds to grow into sustained arts activity.

Well-structured, planned interventions by funders can be extremely important sources of encouragement to local arts groups and supporters. The incentives provided by such interventions often bring support “out of the woodwork” to plan how to take advantage of the expansion of infrastructure or special projects being offered. The challenge to the funding agency is at least two-fold: how to set guidelines sufficiently high to encourage an ambitious vision that is realistic and attainable, and how to identify the communities and the leadership groups within them that have the ability to create an effective constituency for the work.

Jordan, Minnesota. A community of 5,000 residents, it is located on a picturesque bluff overlooking the Minnesota River valley, about 45 minutes south of Minneapolis. Although not growing as fast as some exurban towns, it is facing the pressure of rapidly becoming a bedroom community. Founded in 1854, Jordan has potential as an attraction for visitors—antique shops, historic buildings and ambience. There is also a substantial amount of arts activity: community theater, school and church arts programs, dance studio, quilting and basket-making clubs, etc. Jordan is ripe for further development of the arts. Jordan Community Education was recently awarded a unique grant by the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council to manage a “mini-grant” re-granting program. This “jump start for the arts” opportunity has allowed their arts council to sprinkle small amounts of financial resource (\$500-\$1,000) to many artists, many informal and formal activities as a part of “Arts for the Heart of Jordan.” The grant has also encouraged the emergence of a stronger arts council. Jordan is now focusing on nurturing informal and formal arts groups, building infrastructure for coalescing the presence of the arts, and encouraging a broader pool of artists to engage in community.

Recommendation 2***Recognize the importance and support the vitality of the informal arts***

A preliminary and partial scan of public funding to the ten study communities over the last five years indicated little or no correlation between grants received and the degree of arts activity in the town. This corresponds to published studies on the importance of such activity in urban neighborhoods.

However, this recommendation may seem like it contains an impossible contradiction. How can a formally organized funding agency provide support to or even know about the participants in informal arts activities in all the communities it serves?

We offer two ideas:

- a. The experimental block grant program of the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council to encourage local mini-grants to “jump start” the arts should be continued and expanded to other jurisdictions. While this program is in its beginning stages, preliminary observation suggests that the program is enhancing arts participation by individuals and groups that would not be eligible for formal grant programs. It also has the advantage that members of the local advisory group are likely to know who is doing art in the community. Finally, it allows communities to self-define what is art. This should not be interpreted to be an endorsement of low quality. Rather, local people usually apply high standards to their own art making.
- b. Over time, get to know the newspaper editors/publishers in communities where more information is desired. They will know who “does the arts” in their towns.

Watertown, Minnesota. With a population of 4,000, it is located in the rolling farm country 45 minutes west of Minneapolis. Like other exurban communities, Watertown currently faces eleven proposals for major housing developments. The Crow River flows through the downtown, which has a definite small-town appeal. A biking/hiking trail out of Minneapolis passes through Watertown. The trail provides focus for the community’s summer Rails to Trails festival, a prominent feature of community life. Like rural Harmony and Tracy, Watertown has much arts activity, although it is primarily focused around the summer months. The Watertown Fine Arts Council sponsors a yearly summer performing arts series; community education sponsors a summer young people’s theater. There are also very active school drama and music programs. The leadership of the arts council is very well connected in the community. The community passed a school expansion bond issue in the spring of 2005, which will include a theater facility in the high school. At this time Watertown’s critical challenge is the need for leadership to articulate a long-term vision for the potential of the arts to enhance the quality of community life, as well as for building greater breadth and depth of community-wide volunteer leadership and support for the arts.

3. Leadership with a broad vision for cultural development and an empowering, facilitative style

Effective leadership in the arts, as in any community endeavor, is crucial. The data from this study document a number of features of arts leadership important to cultural development:

- a. Leaders must be able to attract a group, a critical mass, of supporters to share the work of programming and advocacy. Leaders need to be connected into the larger structures of community influence. In this study, the most effective leaders were long-time and respected residents of their towns. But it is certainly possible for people to learn how to establish the connections needed for effective leadership. And it is just as certainly not necessary for effective arts leaders to be “life-long” community residents.
- b. The leadership group needs to establish coalitions or collaborations with other civic entities to assure that the arts sector is well integrated into larger community development plans and projects.

Some studies of arts leadership have emphasized the catalytic effect of a visionary leader moving into a community. The descriptions of the *Bright Stars* communities (Cuesta and Associates) provide several instances of an outsider moving into the town, usually from an urban area, and providing a strong stimulus or leaven to arts development—sort of a trickle-down theory of cultural growth. In this study, there is only one community where this happened—the founding of the Hassler Theater in Plainview. However, crucial to the on-going support for the theater and the arts more broadly in this town are local leaders: a banker, the local board members, etc.

Recommendation 3

Establish or extend a training institute to support the long-term growth of community cultural development leadership in rural/suburban communities

Given the importance of a leadership group to the vitality of the arts sector, continued and expanded emphasis on identifying and training such a group is highly recommended. The program being considered should be made up of two distinct but interrelated components: (a) creation of both a regional training system for local arts leaders and (b) a regional leadership network for on-going mentoring and idea exchange. Ideally, additional opportunities could be provided to advance the relevant knowledge and skills of these local arts leaders, in collaboration with board members, local officials, and business leaders on the ways in which cultural development can contribute to broader community building initiatives. Content of the institute should emphasize critical leadership skills—especially those emphasizing facilitative style, network development, communications, as well as strategic thinking, visioning and values articulation—more than traditional management skills such as financial management.

4. Social networks: integration into the larger structures of community life

Most of the towns classified at the emerging or sustaining level of cultural development see or are beginning to see the arts as important to community development. For some people the arts are seen as important for extrinsic reasons, i.e. the arts provide an amenity for visitors and thus contribute to the economic vitality of the town. This interest in cultural tourism has already been noted for several of the farming towns. But it is also true of the lake resort town and at least one of the suburban communities.

It is also true that the arts are valued by some primarily for intrinsic reasons, i.e. for the enjoyment and broadening of experience that the arts provide to individuals, and for the enhancement of the overall quality of community life.

Many informants affirmed the benefit that the arts provide in bringing people together. There was widespread recognition of the ability of arts experiences to enhance a sense of belonging, of place, to strengthen social cohesion. And also, in those communities characterized by greater levels of cultural diversity, to bridge those differences and to encourage reconciliation in instances of conflict. The latter result, the degree to which arts supporters are actively engaged in efforts at reconciliation in several of the towns, was a serendipitous result of this study.

Onamia-Isles lake region. These communities are located on south of Mille Lacs Lake, one of Minnesota's premiere fishing lakes, and adjacent to the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe's reservation trust lands. Heretofore, the arts activity sometimes found in vacation communities has been small. The towns have school, church and community education arts offerings, a community theater and choir. The Band sponsors casino entertainment, a yearly large-scale powwow, and is the site of a history museum that offers arts classes. The lake region is home to many artists, although they have not been active in jointly showcasing their work. There are no galleries; arts-related businesses are few. The major exception is the Depot Studios in Isle, which thrives under the direction of one very strong leader. Onamia-Isles are faced with the ongoing need for cooperation across racial lines and also a recognized need to broaden leadership in the arts. At present, a major initiative has begun to foster the development of the arts as part of a coordinated tourism strategy: TRAC (Tourism, Recreation, Arts and Crafts). TRAC is just getting underway, but may become an important mechanism for arts development and racial cooperation. Through TRAC a broadened leadership for the arts may emerge.

Recommendation 4

Provide "marketing" and collaboration workshops for and encourage networking among artists

Often artists have no idea how to effectively develop their artistic careers. In addition, some formally trained artists may have come away from the conservatory or art school with little idea of how to serve the community through their work. Professional development workshops can be helpful for artists at all levels of formal training. Topics might include: how to self-publish, how to find and carry out a successful school residency, how to locate commissions, how to view the community in which one lives as a potential client, etc.

Finally, artists, whether formally trained or self-taught, quite usually experience isolation from others. This will be particularly true in areas located outside of the metropolitan core,

where the probability of finding a group of colleagues for critiques and support will be much smaller. Salons, informal get-togethers for mutual critiques and socializing, internet list-serves, etc. can provide ways to overcome isolation, to develop technical skills, and to encourage creative innovation.

Collaborations and partnerships are important to the development of the ecosystem, yet working in partnership is a skill that must be learned. Funders could offer support that both encourages and invites partnership, as well as training in how best to work together, especially across sectors of the community. This work would include becoming conversant in the language of economic development, education, and other aspects of civic engagement.

5. Support to infrastructure development

Recommendation 5.1

Provide direct support to the development of the local arts infrastructure

The research shows that some communities (most notably those that are identified in this study as “sustaining”) have benefited greatly from the creation of a formal community cultural advocating/ coordinating body. Moreover, some informants in all of the communities listed the formation of an arts council as a priority. Given this, we recommend support be given to encourage community cultural planning and possible local arts council development in small suburban and rural communities. The block grant program started by the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council is a promising beginning, in that it provides incentives for selected communities to convene an advisory group of arts supporters. Perhaps the model for a full-fledged program of arts council development might be similar to that of the NEA’s Federal/State and several state/local partnership programs:

Duration	Activity	Goals	Milestones	Match Req.
Year 1	Create a community cultural plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish community advisory body Assess community cultural assets and capacity to support a coordinating agency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If community interest/capacity warrants, apply for three-years of arts council development support. 	0
Year 2	Community arts council development program: pilot phase.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish/continue community advisory body in selected communities Design arts council program and policies based on community capacities and needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a board and identify staff Train staff and board Establish pilot arts council programs in the community Begin to develop sustainable funding streams 	25%
Year 3	Community arts council development program: Initial assessment phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue pilot arts council programs Develop mechanisms for assessing the local suitability of programs and policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluate or assess the effectiveness of pilot programs Revise community cultural plan as needed Continue funding stream development 	50%

Year 4	Community arts council development program: formal launch phase	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish formal arts council • Inform the wider community and encourage broad participation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainable funding secured • Municipal cultural policy developed 	75%
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In some cases, groups of communities with similar economic or environmental circumstances might be encouraged to form area-wide arts councils, below the Regional Arts Councils but supra local in extent.

Such a program of arts council development would provide the resources necessary to assess local or area cultural capacity and arts agency feasibility. In the case of the federal and state programs, continued funding was contingent on a commitment by the state or county government to establish a formal cultural policy and minimum level of ongoing support for the cultural agency. A similar *quid pro quo* could be used to encourage local buy-in.

Harmony, Minnesota. In the 1970's and 1980's Harmony was faced with the crisis in agriculture, which led to numerous farmers declaring bankruptcy. Coincidentally, farmland began to be purchased by families from the Old Order Amish. While these two events were not linked, resentment of the Amish was prevalent. Since then, the Governor's design team has infused economic development and planning assistance. The economy has rebounded and mutually beneficial relationships have been formed with the Amish. Civic leaders actively seek ways to preserve the charming small town aesthetic, building on the Amish presence, the proximity to regional bike trails, and the local attraction of the Niagara Cave. New businesses include two art galleries connected to a network of artist studios and galleries. Local businesses underwrite a successful summer performing art series. Harmony received a Minnesota State Arts Board Audience Development Initiative grant, which has led to the formation of an arts council. Harmony arts leadership also avails itself of training and development opportunities through its Regional Arts Council. As one arts leader commented, "Harmony is not an arts destination. We seek the arts at the core of everyday lives. We simply want a more solid community, a well-rounded community, beauty in our lives." Harmony Arts Council sees its next steps in developing a local arts infrastructure and furthering civic engagement: building stronger coalitions, strengthening support and furthering their integration into the larger economic and community development plans.

Recommendation 5.2

Consider funding strategies that can respond directly and appropriately to specific community ideas, needs, situations, and opportunities

Given the small size of the communities in this study, it is not surprising that local cultural infrastructure is not fully developed. Thus, it is difficult for the traditional formal grant application and service programs to identify in advance the scope and variety of interests in all the communities that a funder wishes to serve. This presents a unique opportunity for the Regional Arts Councils and other funders to question the assumptions and expectations that have informed traditional approaches to community cultural development and to create an innovative, investment-oriented support strategy.

Funders, especially in partnership, might consider developing support programs and services based on a venture capital, community development investment model. This approach solicits requests for funds for projects based on a set of locally defined specific cultural development goals and objectives. The core assumption here is that the most productive ideas will come from creative leaders and community collaborations, not grant guidelines. Evaluation of specific project proposals could be based on:

1. Artistic and/or organizational excellence
2. The project's feasibility
3. The project's contribution to one or more of the following:
 - The building of a sustained support system or infrastructure for the creation and delivery of cultural programs in a community
 - The development of new audiences or venues for new and/or existing cultural resources in a community
 - Increased awareness of and support for the arts as a valuable community resource
 - Increased investment in the arts in a community

The specific programmatic design or tactics employed by applicants to achieve these objectives would not be mandated or directed, but rather the applicant would need to show how the proposed investment would produce one or more of the program's desired outcomes. The object here would be to provide broadly defined program guidelines and categories that:

1. Allow the broadest range of communities and organizations to apply
2. Minimize mandates and restrictions
3. Are responsive rather than directive
4. Are focused on systemic outcome and impact
5. Invite authentic articulation of needs and opportunities
6. Encourage proposals along a continuum that ranges from the mundanely practical to the wildly inventive
7. Support the development of innovative leadership in the field

Such a program creates additional responsibility for the funding agency to help communities develop and carry out projects that do not fit within traditional models. Thus, assuming that financial resources can be identified, the funder might:

1. Establish a coordinating staff position to assist potential applicants

2. Provide resources and time for program planning and design by potential applicants
3. Design a three- to five-year pilot program with resources and a schedule that reflects a significant review and possible re-design in year two

IN CLOSING

Back to Tracy! Why is Tracy, Minnesota such an active center for arts and culture? First and foremost, there is leadership that understands and values a deeply rooted yet always evolving sense of place. There is leadership that knows the importance of creating opportunities for its citizens to sit out on the front porch together and gather as a community to celebrate. There is leadership that with pride looks to the future, attends city meetings and has the vision to declare:

“ . . . it’s not just what it will cost. It’s what it will do for the whole community. A fine arts and athletic facility will bring people to Tracy businesses and attract people to town. We need the best to attract families here.”

Community arts funders and supporters should support that vision with tools and resources that:

- Nurture the informal arts
- Facilitate development of a language around the intrinsic as well as instrumental value of the arts
- Support infrastructure development
- Encourage community integration and development of social networks
- Invest in long term leadership development

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