

This final chapter presents our conclusions, assembled from the previous chapters, about how arts institutions might best go about their efforts to build public participation in their activities. The salient points concerning effective strategies and the need for an integrative approach are recapped. Also provided is a recap of the guidelines arts organizations should keep in mind as they design and implement their engagement strategies.

### **EFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES**

Effective engagement strategies are targeted strategies. The key to developing such strategies is knowing what tactics to use with which target populations and when. The alignment of participation goals, target populations, and participation-building tactics is central to this process. Each of the ways to increase participation—by broadening it, deepening it, or diversifying it—is best suited to a different population depending on where that population is in the process of deciding whether to participate in the arts. Broadening is best suited to individuals already inclined to participate in the arts but not presently doing so (i.e., infrequent participants); deepening is most appropriate for those already involved with the arts (frequent participants); diversifying is appropriate for individuals not inclined to participate in the arts (rare, if ever, participants). Recognizing the distinctions among these different groups and that certain tactics are appropriate for each group is the primary challenge in developing effective engagement strategies.

Information is essential to the alignment of goals, target populations, and tactics, and it must flow both from potential and current participants to arts organizations and from arts organizations to potential and current participants. Arts organizations cannot properly align their goals with their target populations and tactics if they do not have accurate information about those populations. And this information must be more than the socio-demographic data routinely collected by many organizations; it must also cover the attitudes, lifestyles,

leisure behavior, motivations, and specific program interests of their target populations, as well as any potential barriers that might inhibit these populations' participation. Without this information, arts institutions are likely to find it difficult to design and implement effective strategies for reaching target populations.

Similarly, current and potential participants need information about arts organizations if they are to make informed choices. The types of information they will need vary depending on where they are in the decisionmaking process. Individuals not inclined to participate in the arts will need to be convinced that the arts organization and its programs have something to offer them. Those inclined to participate in the institution's programs but not currently doing so will need information on what the institution has to offer and when. Those already participating in an institution's programs need to understand why becoming more involved is of benefit to them.

In developing strategies for providing and gathering information, arts organizations need to consider not only what information they need or what message they want to convey, but also what methods of collecting and disseminating information work best. In other words, they must familiarize themselves with the most effective ways to collect information from potential and current participants, how the different types of participants gather information about leisure activity choices, and the kinds of messages most likely to resonate with each type.

This task of effectively collecting information about target populations and then disseminating information to those populations can be quite challenging. And what our survey results suggest is that many arts organizations do not give these issues sufficient attention. By and large, the institutions we surveyed were likely to rely on discussions among their staff as a primary means of gathering information about participants. It is unclear whether informal techniques such as this one are well-suited to collecting the kind of attitudinal and behavioral information about current and potential participants that we believe are key to developing effective engagement strategies. Similarly, although these organizations use a wide variety of techniques to disseminate information about their programs, no more than 40 percent of them rated these techniques as effective. We suspect that the problem here may not be the channels used to put information before the public per se but, rather, knowing when to use those channels and for which target groups.

Finally, although arts organizations will in all likelihood concentrate their engagement efforts on individuals considering participation or already participating in the arts, they need to be aware that the largest pool of potential participants most likely consists not of these individuals but of people not inclined to

participate. The task of convincing this population is apt to be difficult, since it requires that arts institutions change these people's attitudes. While the long-run payoffs associated with increasing the participation of this population can be significant, investing resources in this purpose can entail significant opportunity costs for organizations with inadequate resources to begin with. Thus, organizations will need to strike a balance between targeting individuals at different points in the decisionmaking process.

### NEED FOR AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

Participation-building efforts are likely to require considerable amounts of an organization's time and other resources—resources that otherwise could be used for arts programming and other artistic activities or for other institutional needs. It is therefore very important that an arts organization take an integrative approach to participation building; that is,

- Begin by considering how the organization's participation-building activities align with its core values and purpose by choosing participation goals that support its purpose.
- Identify clear target populations and base its tactics on good information about those groups.
- Understand what internal and external resources can be committed to building participation.
- Establish a process for feedback and self-evaluation.

Successful participation-building efforts require the commitment of an organization's key staff and operating units, its board, and its key funders. Such shared commitment must be based on the conviction that sustained audience development is critical to achieving the organization's mission. This requires an organization to articulate a clear set of participation goals that serve its basic mission and purpose and for which it can build consensus. Without this link, participation-building activities may be perceived as serving multiple and conflicting purposes or, even worse, as marginal to the organization's real work.

Once the participation goals have been chosen, the next step is to set out an operational plan for achieving these goals. Such a plan incorporates basic tactical decisions such as which target populations to choose, how to gather and analyze information about those populations, and what tactics to employ based on this knowledge.

The next step is to consider how to implement the operational plan—i.e., what resources are needed and how they will be obtained. The organization will have

to take stock of its own internal assets (including staff, professional abilities, facilities, and equipment), and the alternative uses to which these assets might be applied. Indeed, an organization should consider how building participation can influence its entire operation, including its artistic programs and its ability to fulfill its institutional mission.

Since few organizations will have all the resources they need to implement their plans, they will have to carefully determine what resources might be available within the larger community. Collaborating with other institutions is one way to expand the resources an organization has at its disposal, but the effectiveness of collaboration depends on how much the goals of the parties to the collaboration complement each other.

Arts organizations must remember that no matter how carefully they align their engagement effort with their broader institutional mission, develop their operational plan, and assess their internal and external resources, it is very unlikely that the entire process will be straightforward or work exactly as planned. That is why it is essential that the final step of an integrative approach be to build a process for evaluation and feedback. This requires organizations to think carefully about what yardsticks they might use to gauge the success of their efforts and how to implement those yardsticks. Because success most likely cannot be measured exclusively in quantitative terms, organizations should also consider other, more qualitative measures with which to evaluate the success of their participation-building activities and whether those engagement activities serve their wider mission. Finally, arts organizations need to decide how to incorporate their assessments into their ongoing activities.

## **GUIDELINES FOR BUILDING PARTICIPATION**

As should be clear, an arts organization's participation-building strategies must be tailored both to its target population and to its broader institutional context. Since both of these factors will vary across organizations, it is not surprising that we are not proposing one strategy or one set of best practices for all organizations. This does not mean, however, that there are no general guidelines that organizations should bear in mind as they develop and execute participation-building strategies. Indeed, the survey results reported in Appendices A and B demonstrate that there is a good deal of similarity in how organizations pursue participation building. The range of options that organizations may consider is large, but it is not boundless. In an effort to provide guidance for how to approach the task of participation building, we offer the following summarized list of guidelines grouped according to where they fit within the participation-building framework.

*General Points:*

1. Recognize that building participation is hard work and requires serious commitments of time and other resources.
2. Recognize that participation building is a team effort requiring continuous communication both inside the organization (with staff and board) and outside the organization (with community collaborators).
3. Know the organization and its capabilities, including its strengths and weaknesses.
4. Be aware that building participation is not a straightforward task and can involve developing different tactics for different target populations. Recognize that limited resources will often require tradeoffs among competing goals.

*Setting Participation Goals*

5. Set goals that are both realistic and consistent.
6. In identifying goals, look rigorously at the organization's purpose and at how building participation supports that purpose.
7. For all goals, be clear about what "increasing participation" means, what groups are to be the focus of the participation-building efforts, and how progress might be measured.

*Choosing Target Populations*

8. Determine what might motivate target groups to participate in the institution's programs, what the most important barriers to their participation are, and what the best techniques for addressing both these factors are.
9. Understand where the target population is in the decisionmaking process, since this is the key to developing effective tactics.
10. Do not ignore the population not inclined to participate. It may be harder to reach, but the reward for the effort could be significant.
11. Recognize that the choice of target population directly affects the resources needed to develop effective strategies, and that tradeoffs may well have to be made when choosing where to set priorities.

*Tactics*

12. Remember that to be effective, tactics must be targeted.

13. In choosing an operational plan, recognize that some factors can be controlled and some cannot. Focus your efforts on the former.

*Information Strategies*

14. Recognize that effective information strategies demand a two-way exchange of information: from the target population to the organization and from the organization to the target population.
15. Remember that to be effective, an information strategy must identify the target population, the most effective method for reaching that population, and the message that is to be conveyed.

*Resources*

16. Recognize that the institution is part of a community. Get to know that community and its organizations, including their strengths and weaknesses and how they complement the institution's.
17. Pursue collaborative relationships with other organizations with a clear understanding of what each party can bring to the collaboration and with a shared commitment to the same goals.

*Evaluation and Feedback*

18. Recognize that success in participation building is not simply a question of numbers. Consider how to evaluate your progress both quantitatively and qualitatively and how to gauge success even if it cannot be measured.
19. Since "getting it right" the first time is unlikely, be sure to evaluate progress and modify plans accordingly.