

Evaluating the Arts in Berkshire County: A Sentinels Report

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Intro:

Berkshire County is known for its wealth of arts and culture organizations. Places like Tanglewood, Jacob's Pillow, and Mass MoCA draw thousands of summer tourists. But what are these institutions, and others lesser-known arts organizations, really up to? What effect do they have on the communities they reside in and on the artists who live and work nearby? Which initiatives of theirs are struggling to meet their goals, and which are most worthy of support?

These are some of the questions Professor Sheppard and I addressed in our work this summer. Our research was done as part of an initiative by the Berkshire Taconic Community Foundation (BTCF), a local foundation interested in all aspects of life in Berkshire County – and this summer, specifically interested in the arts. BTCF will be drawing upon our research in their application for a grant from the Barr Foundation in Boston, which they hope to use to support local arts organizations in initiatives that have been found to be meaningful and effective.

In the course of this work, I not only learned about what's going on in the Berkshire County arts scene but also about what *could be going on* that would improve artists' and community members' experiences. As a rising senior interested in pursuing a future in community arts organizations, access to this information helped me plan an arts project of my own, inspired in part by BTCF's initiative.

My research:

My role as Professor Sheppard's research assistant involved a number of jobs. I attended meetings of the advisory committee for BTCF's project, both in-person and via conference call, did literature reviews, analyzed data in search of important connections, conducted an interview with a local arts-education expert, and helped Professor Sheppard write a final report on our findings for BTCF.

Along the way, the objectives of BTCF – and thus, the specific focus of our study – shifted. At the beginning of our conversations with BTCF, their two main goals were to investigate arts organizations' strategies for community engagement and the ways in which they are supporting working artists. By the end, the focus on community engagement, and particularly on audience diversity (in terms of race, income, and age), became clearer. The focus on support for working artists, however, shifted a specific focus on *networking* between working artists and on pathways into careers in the arts for local residents. K-12 arts education also emerged as an important aspect of the project. In many cases, the individuals involved in the process determined the relative importance of these priorities. For example, issues relevant to arts organizations, rather than to working artists, seemed to take priority in part because the majority of advisory committee and focus group members were organization directors.

In my perspective, our research was focused primarily on providing evidence to help answer the questions: "What can arts organizations in Berkshire County do to engage diverse community members?" and, more generally, "What can be done support the arts in Berkshire County, and to address the needs of artists and arts organizations?"

My portion of the literature review focused on the kinds of strategies arts organizations use to increase community engagement and audience diversity, not necessarily in Berkshire County but primarily in regions with similar characteristics. My review suggested a number of strategies to be particularly effective, which are outlined below.

- **Making events accessible.** This involves not only making events *affordable* – by decreasing ticket prices, or offering special discounts or free passes to certain groups – but also organizing them nearby and scheduling them for times that make sense for community members. Transportation is a particularly big accessibility challenge in Berkshire County.
- **Improving the comfort level of events.** Our research suggested that large, open spaces and big crowds make new arts-consumers feel less “watched” at arts events. A fun, laid-back atmosphere is also plus, which is one reason why arts festivals are often successful.
- **Changing programming.** This is a sensitive topic for many arts organizations, because programming is often integral to an organization’s mission and purpose – but it is undeniable that tailoring programming to the interests, preferences, or cultures of community groups increases engagement. This is also related to comfort; people often feel uncomfortable attending an event featuring an artist or composer they have never heard of, or that they feel they would not understand.
- **Community creation and curation.** This is perhaps the most powerful strategy we discovered. Events that give community members the chance to create art (community theater productions, musical ensembles, all kinds of classes and

workshops) are enticing for participants, and performances or exhibitions can draw other community members to support their family members, friends and neighbors. Community *curation* refers to programs in which community members are given the opportunity to contribute to or design the programming of an organization. This ensures that programming will be relevant to community members and also ties them in a powerful way to a local organization. Examples include plays co-written and produced with community members and galleries that either exhibit work by community amateur artists/craftsmen or engage community members in the selection of art.

After the literature review was complete, my job shifted to involve working with data about Berkshire County. Some was arts-related, and some was related to indicators of general quality of life; in both cases I was looking for interesting comparisons (either changes over time, or comparisons between Berkshire County and state averages) that might be useful to BTCF. Below, I've summarized some of the findings from this stage in the process.

- **Health challenges.** Compared to the state average, Berkshire County is really struggling with opioid overdoses and other substance abuse related deaths. When we're considering the factors that influence arts participation for community members, it is important to understand the broader challenges they face and the issues that are relevant to them.
- **Differences from state average in the lives of working artists.** Artists in Berkshire County face a different set of advantages and disadvantages than artists

elsewhere in Massachusetts. Housing in Berkshire County cities is relatively affordable, and some areas have dedicated spaces for working artists, like makers' spaces and live/work studio space. However, Berkshire County artists spend more money on materials and equipment than elsewhere in the state, and they struggle more with transportation challenges.

- **The need for connectivity.** Toward the end of the summer, most of the data I was looking at was from artists and leaders of arts organizations in Berkshire County, in the form of survey responses and transcripts from focus groups. These sources led to the biggest take-away from our research – the need for more connectivity between artists and arts organization in the county. Over and over again, artists and arts organization representatives asked for ways to align their efforts, to find partners to collaborate and share ideas with, and to effectively spread information about new arts initiatives, opportunities, and job postings. Our suggestion to address this need was to resurrect the kind of “backbone” organization that used to exist as the old Berkshire Creative, but in a more sustainable way. In our plan, an organization like 1 Berkshire, which houses the current, less-active iteration of Berkshire Creative, would hire a county-wide arts coordinator, who would be in charge of staying up to date with arts happenings in the county, organizing conferences, setting up collaborations, sharing information, and acting as a resource for any artists or organization who needed it.

One of the clearest examples of Berkshire County individuals shaping the course of this project was the introduction of Lisa Donovan and the issue of K-12 arts-education.

Lisa Donovan is a passionate arts education researcher and a professor of Arts Management at MCLA, and BTCF was very interested in including her work in their initiative. The Barr Foundation, unfortunately, is explicitly *uninterested* in supporting arts education, but BTCF still found ways to mention its significance in their final report – as a way to boost community engagement, for example, and as the beginning of a pathway into careers in the arts. I interviewed Lisa over the phone, with the intention of getting as many of her thoughts as I could about BTCF’s focus areas. Our conversation moved quickly from arts education to other areas, and her contributions are summarized below.

- **Arts education is unevenly distributed.** While some K-12 school districts in Berkshire County have strong arts programs, others have little to no arts at all. Similarly, certain regions (and certain demographics) have access to a range of creative youth development programs outside of schools, while other children have none of these programs available to them. More school arts programs are being cut each year.
- **MCLA is still focused on training arts workers.** Because one of our areas of interest was pathways into arts careers for local young people, we were interested in the arts management department at MCLA and their B-HIP arts internship program. Although we had heard elsewhere that B-HIP was no longer running, Lisa Donovan explained that it had merely shifted from a graduate school-level summer course to a year-round internship-finding support for undergrads. According to Lisa, MCLA also wants to focus mainly on serving their own students, rather than bringing in a lot of students from other schools.

- **Connectivity is needed in the form of a “collaborative backbone”.** Lisa reaffirmed the fact that artists and arts organizations in Berkshire County need, more than anything else, more connectivity. Because there is not a single organization that has the capacity to facilitate all the connections that arts workers need, Lisa conceptualized a “collaborative backbone” agency, made up of a board of individuals and organizations across the county. Our final recommendation to BTCF (described earlier in this report) was slightly different, but still hinged upon involving as many artists and organizations as possible in a countywide network.

My own projects:

My conversation with Lisa also sparked a number of ideas for projects outside of our current research. At Williams, I am the founder and director of a student initiative called Ephs Out Loud, whose mission is to connect the campus and community through collaborative arts programming. We’ve had a number of community partners, including most of the Williamstown and North Adams K-12 schools, but it has always been a wish of mine to work with MCLA. Williams has great arts departments, but MCLA is strong in arts management, which Williams doesn’t offer at all. It turns out that Lisa is also interested in increasing collaboration between the schools, and some programs have even been started to try to encourage it – including opening MCLA arts management courses to Williams students and Williams dance courses to MCLA students. Between scheduling barriers and a lack of advertisement, these programs haven’t attracted very many students from either schools – but Lisa and I believe that there are some ways that MCLA can

connect with the Williams arts departments through Ephs Out Loud. In the fall, Ephs Out Loud is going to host Lisa as a guest speaker in the Williams music department. It is our hope to advocate for realistic options for students from both schools to learn from the other, whether through cross-listed courses with transportation help, or just special events and lectures. Williams could also partner with MCLA for the B-HIP program, promoting collaboration between the schools while also encouraging more college students to stay in this area and work in the creative economy.

Throughout my research this summer, I have returned again and again to an idea for an Ephs Out Loud event I have been planning for next April. I wanted the event to check off a few boxes: including the visual arts (most of our programming centers on music), collaborating with MCLA and artists in North Adams, and taking place off-campus. But most of all, I wanted to design an arts event that would engage diverse community members in an experience that felt comfortable, meaningful, and personal to them. It occurred to me that what I needed to know to do that was exactly what I was studying all summer – not to mention, I was getting the chance to meet many of the individuals and organizations in Berkshire County that would make perfect partners for such an event. Everything started to fall into place.

The event will be a one-day, pop-up community gallery. Ephs Out Loud will invite diverse community groups from Williamstown and North Adams (student groups from Williams and MCLA, K-12 school groups, the Makers' Mill, Roots Teen Center, Williamstown Youth Center, Sweet Brook nursing home etc.) to create pieces of art responding to a shared prompt: "What does it mean to belong to this place?" We'll include performance art as well, encourage artists to create participatory pieces whenever

possible, and include some fully collaborative experiences for gallery-goers to contribute to, like a mural or chalkboard conversation. The artists involved will set up the space in the morning and the day will conclude with a community dinner.

So far, I've been able to incorporate into my plans a number of the strategies for community engagement that we learned about in the literature review and conversations with Berkshire arts organizations. In order to make the event accessible, I've chosen a location on the BRTA bus line in downtown North Adams – the 87 Main building, which has recently been acquired by a new church in the area. Like all Ephs Out Loud events, it will also be free. As I thought about spaces that would feel comfortable for community members, I avoided institutional spaces like colleges and “artsy” spaces like Mass MoCA – which might seem less welcoming to some community members. While I hope the event will feel meaningful to many attendants, I am also keeping in mind the recommendations we heard to keep events fun and laid-back; I plan to seek out musicians and dancers that will contribute to more of an arts-festival feeling, and to provide plenty of chances for attendants to participate in no-rules, art-making activities. I'll advertise the gallery, as much as possible, as a family event, and send special invitations to schools and youth programs. Finally, I hope this will be another successful example of what I described above as “community creation and curation” – giving community members the chance to tell, through art, what is important and beautiful to them. Local visitors to the gallery who did not contribute art will see pieces (in some cases, created by people and organizations they know) directly related to the place they belong to. Even more than just engaging people in art, I hope that the experience will reaffirm and strengthen a sense of

community for those involved – by encouraging them to think about what their home means to them and giving them a glimpse of what it means to their neighbors.