



CORNERSTONE

CONVERSATIONS

Qualitative Analysis

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Qualitative Analysis of the Oklahoma Arts Council's Cornerstone Conversations Series

Introduction

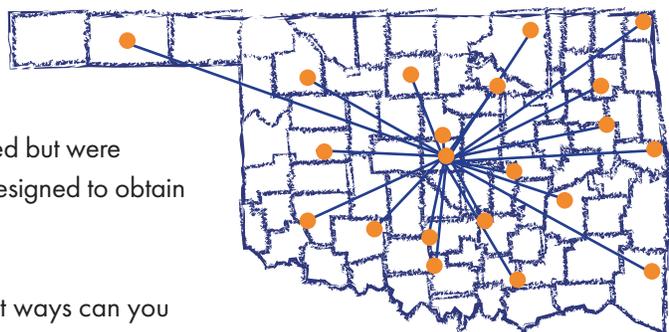
The Oklahoma Arts Council's mission is to lead the advancement of Oklahoma's thriving arts industry, with a vision that the arts will be a transformative force for Oklahoma by improving education, enhancing quality of life, and boosting economic development. To that end, the Oklahoma Arts Council (OAC) held a series of listening sessions entitled "Cornerstone Conversations" across Oklahoma from late 2019 to early 2020. The tour was designed to give a voice to Oklahomans representing diverse communities and partner with the OAC to share needs and ideas regarding the arts in communities and schools statewide. The "Cornerstone Conversations" will directly inform the Oklahoma Arts Council 2021-2025 strategic plan.

According to Alan Key's article, "Art and Community Development: The Role the Arts Have in Regenerating Communities," art plays a significant role in helping communities discover their own cultures, identities, and traditional art forms (Kay, 2000). Kay points out that art allows individuals to feel connected and more involved in their communities. In addition, the article suggests that the arts provide social and economic growth in communities. Research indicates that the inclusion of art in communities is impactful not only on the individual, but on community connectedness as a whole.

The OAC's "Cornerstone Conversations" were specifically designed as an inclusive process that connected the OAC with geographically and culturally diverse communities. The sessions were co-facilitated by members of each local community. Attendees participated in small group discussions and provided written feedback. Through Cornerstone Conversations, the OAC was able to listen and learn from Oklahomans, rural and urban, native and immigrant. Together, a culturally valid and socioeconomically beneficial pathway towards the future for arts in Oklahoma will be forged.

Qualitative Method

The Cornerstone Conversations were held in the following nine Oklahoma communities: Ardmore, Enid, Guymon, Idabel, Miami, Shawnee, Tulsa, Weatherford, and Woodward. More were scheduled but were canceled due to COVID-19. These meetings were designed to obtain data from various community focus groups.



The meetings began with a focus question: "In what ways can you and the Oklahoma Arts Council encourage greater participation in cultural activities in your community?" The entire group was asked to write personal responses to the question, without discussion. Then everyone was divided into smaller groups to discuss the individual responses. A scribe in each small group captured the individual responses on sticky notes, boiled them down to three-to-five

words, and wrote one idea per card. Then the facilitator moved the cards onto the wall, gradually organizing them under the guidance of the larger group, until all the cards are organized into like-groupings and each group had a descriptive title. With this, the group identified and organized their responses to the question. These were the responses from which the constituents' key issues were identified. Finally, the facilitator asked the group for their insights and observations from the process and its results. The results will be sent back out to these participants.

Qualitative Analysis

The University of Oklahoma's Hope Research Center was asked to compile the data collected at the Cornerstone Conversations. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to categorize and identify the main themes that developed across all focus groups.

The data collected was organized and summarized so that key statements and general ideas could be identified and then recurrent themes could be coded and analyzed. The major themes across all nine communities are outlined below. Direct quotes or ideas specific to a certain community from focus group participants are included to highlight individualized perspectives.

The analysis concludes with a brief summary of some salient differences that arose in meetings in urban versus rural communities. These concerns centered on issues of diversity, equity and inclusion.

Themes

After analyzing the Cornerstone Conversations, five themes emerged as being the most prevalent amongst all the communities. The themes include: Education and Artist Development, Accessibility and Inclusion, Advocacy and Partnerships, Marketing and Funding, and Building Community. Another point of consideration is Urban versus Rural Community Concerns. Community feedback on this topic is presented. Appendix A summarizes the key findings from each community, and includes word clouds to illustrate the main points.

I. Education and Artist Development

Across all nine communities, education was a common theme, both in the sense of educating artists across generations, but also educating the public on the importance and appreciation of the arts. Improving arts education from pre-k to senior citizens was a key topic. In public K-12 schools, inequity in funding for arts education exists due to widespread education

cuts made over the past few years. Slashing arts programming has deepened pre-existing inequalities that divide wealthy and poor schools and widened gaps between rural and urban schools. Increasing the focus on funding fine arts in schools in a more equitable manner, or "bridging the gap" as a Guymon participant stated, is a shared need. Locating or incentivizing art instructors to teach in rural areas was another idea.

Once they realize it's accessible and fun and enjoyable, they start to seek out more art. There is a hunger for art in the younger ages.

-Nathan, Shawnee Music Teacher

Several focus groups, including Tulsa and Weatherford, mentioned the idea to adopt science teachers' proven methods of successfully funding STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) projects in recent years to STEAM projects that include the arts. Using an interdisciplinary approach to arts programming in schools by blending art with history, technology, literature and science may aid in funding efforts. It was suggested that the OAC could strengthen relationships with public school systems and the Department of Education to offer educational opportunities and promote events/activities.

More education for adult artists was mentioned at many meetings, particularly increasing professional development opportunities. This includes opportunities for older adults as well and intergenerational activities/events. The question was posed in the Tulsa meeting of what are the needs of up and coming artists or artists emerging from poverty? The concern is that artists are sometimes left out of the conversation in favor of arts organizers and their concerns need to be heard. It is also important to teach artists how to have agency, read contracts, self-promote, etc. Educating the public, community business leaders, and local and state officials on the importance of the arts and creativity was also a common theme. Art enjoyment and appreciation should be taught to all ages as well.

II. Accessibility and Inclusion

Every community mentioned the need for arts to be more accessible to all individuals and groups. "Using art as a bridge", "bringing art to the people," "reaching out" to those who are not usually involved in the arts were common themes. Addressing barriers to access and including the arts in public spaces such as the parks, libraries, crosswalks, on buildings, etc. are ideas that many participants suggested. Not everyone has the financial means, physical access, transportation options, etc. to participate in the arts. Every community saw art as a unifier, a way to bring diverse groups together.

We have an idea of what art is and what it isn't. It's very exclusionary. We need to change that.
-Erica, Shawnee

The OAC can help create more accessible and inclusive opportunities. This includes ensuring that access and inclusion practices are integrated at all levels of the arts. It also means ensuring that rural and geographically underserved areas are reached.

"I am seeing an opportunity for how to learn from each other: OAC, Arts Organizations, Communities, etc. There is a lot that people don't necessarily know about. There are a lot of gaps."
-Tulsa Community Member

III. Advocacy and Partnerships

Partnerships and collaborative relationships that position arts and culture as integral to developing creative communities are important themes. Partnering with businesses for funding purposes as well as for venues and art spaces were key ideas. A particularly salient idea was encouraging businesses to partner with local schools to help fund instructors, field trips, and supplies.

Advocating for arts with local city councils and state government was important to most community participants. Advocacy for increased funding in education with state legislators could help restore arts programs statewide.

Partnerships between communities to share resources would be beneficial, either regionally for rural areas or urban/rural collaborations. The OAC could play an important role in connecting communities to local and state government support and facilitating regional collaborations.

IV. Marketing and Funding

Each community stressed the importance of having OAC's assistance with publicity and the promotion of events and advertising, particularly online and through social media. Communities would like to see a shared digital community calendar, shared app, an artist database and other technological marketing strategies. Advertising and promoting minority and marginalized community events and projects is also a shared interest.

"Funding is essential, but funding without a system to distribute equitably is an issue. Shift the system of how money is circulating and how we reward with tax structures, policy, etc. More money is always good but not enough."

-Tulsa Community Member

The OAC can help tell the story of each community by featuring and recognizing artists. They can magnify rural artists by holding regional meetings and events.

Another main theme was creating or cultivating funding mechanisms that will provide for a secure and stable funding base for artists, arts organizations and arts educators.

Maximizing grant matching opportunities, spreading awareness of classroom grants and finding non-grant sources of funding from multiple sources are important ideas. The OAC could provide more training for grant writing and arts funding to communities.

Many rural communities would like to see designated funding streams for arts in rural areas. Tulsa supported general operating funds to help diversity and equity efforts as well as more funds for up and coming artists. Also, participants saw a need for non-profit art groups to start implementing for-profit business models.

"I have a dream of using Shawnee's old First National Building and creating a place where artists can come to live, work and give back to the community. A place where artists can live and work together."

-Nathan, Shawnee

V. Building Community

Public art can be a catalyst for creative community development. Building community through the arts was important to participants. They suggested having more plein-air gatherings, public events, art classes, cultural exhibits, heritage activities and community arts centers or public arts spaces in rural areas. The OAC could help advise on organizing public events, particularly in rural communities.

Another common theme was developing artist residences, or a “safe space for creative people.” These would be spaces where artists could live and work together to build connections and create.

Most communities in this study were rural. Tulsa was the primary urban area, and the participants in Tulsa’s Cornerstone Conversations focused on the same themes as the other communities such as Education, Accessibility, Funding, and Collaborations. But of note, Tulsa participants were intensely interested in issues around diversity and equity as well as capacity building related to planning, succession, board development, and facilities.

Due to Tulsa’s long history of racial injustice, including the Tulsa Race Massacre, participants want to broaden community conversations about diversity, and question historical ways of doing things as well work to end white supremacy. They wish to adopt a more collective commitment to diversity and ensure that the arts remain focused on ensuring equity.

In Woodward and a few other rural communities, concerns were raised over the equitable distribution of funding between rural and urban areas and a sense of elitism apparent in the larger communities. Participants would like to see an expansion of outreach to rural artists and to have more resources distributed beyond metro areas. Some mentioned that a designated funding stream for the arts in rural communities would be beneficial.

According to the definition from “Americans for the Arts,” “Equity” is the fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all people, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups. “Cultural equity” “embodies the values, policies, and practices that ensure all people... are represented in the development of arts policy; the support of artists; the nurturing of accessible, thriving venues for expression; and the fair distribution of programmatic, financial, and informational resources.” Focusing on an inclusive and equitable mindset for arts in the community is important in order to encourage involvement from all people in the community.

“I like to count the people of color in the room during these meetings. If we want to achieve diversity, it requires asking people of color to be at these meetings. I am here because I was invited, but I don’t see any other of my peers, people of color, here.”

-Lydia, Tulsa

Conclusion

After analyzing the “Cornerstone Conversations” and summarizing the main points from each conversation, it was interesting to see the similar themes from each community. Incorporating arts into education, as well as funding artists in schools and in the community was one of the main themes. Ensuring accessibility and inclusion of the arts for members of the community was another important theme. The “Cornerstone Conversations” highlighted creating partnerships amongst the communities to share resources and ideas. Finally, advocacy and funding for the arts as well as building community were highly encouraged in the conversations. The analysis ended with a brief overview of the differences between concerns in rural versus urban communities. This qualitative analysis of the “Cornerstone Conversation” series paves the road for the development of the OAC’s next strategic plan for the arts across Oklahoma.



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Appendix A

Community Summaries

Works Cited

Americans for the Arts. (2016). Statement on Cultural Equity. *Americans for the Arts*. Retrieved from: https://www.americansforthearts.org/sites/default/files/pdf/2016/about/cultural_equity/ARTS_CulturalEquity_updated.pdf

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