

The Journey Toward Cultural Equity

CITY OF AUSTIN
ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

Cultural Funding Review Process
Case Study

MJR Partners

Arts Management Consultants
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Transforming Arts Funding Systems in Austin, Texas: Operationalizing Equity Toward Increasing Access

Austin, Texas is widely known as a vibrant, innovative city that values the creative, the bold and the weird. However, its sprawling growth in recent decades has produced unintended consequences, including increasing economic segregation. Related areas of concern include the exclusion of diverse voices, the acceleration of funding disparities, the outmigration of artists of color and the polarization of the city's cultural ecosystem.

To address these systemic inequities head-on and transform an "unsustainable model," the Cultural Affairs Division of the Economic Development Department of the City of Austin engaged MJR Partners to assess its Cultural Grants Programs through the lens of racial and cultural equity.

This case study describes the input and examination process between 2018 and 2022. It introduces the strategies and programs proposed to transform long-standing cultural grant programs to better meet the ever-changing needs of Austin's unique, imaginative and vital community.

The Challenge: *Social Equity*

When revising public policy, particularly in the arts and culture sector, it is essential to acknowledge and understand historical context, both locally and nationally. This may include a full range of social, racial, economic and political factors that have led to exclusion and marginalization.

In May 2015, the Austin City Council identified the need to increase access and equity in the distribution of public resources across all city departments. Resolution 20150507-027 provides background and guidance for advancing their goals. Here is an excerpt from the resolution:

Whereas a recent study from the Martin Prosperity Institute determined that Austin is the most economically segregated city in the country, and that Austin ranked fourth nationally for occupational segregation and fifth nationally for educational segregation; and

Whereas the City Demographer stated that the reduction in the local poverty rate from 20.3 percent in 2012 to 17.8 percent in 2013 was at least partially attributable to the displacement of low-income residents, shown by increases in poverty rates in surrounding counties which saw an increase from 10 percent to 22 percent over the same period; and

Whereas 2013 data produced by the United States Census Bureau showed that 5.4 % of non-Hispanic white children under the age of five in the City of Austin were living at or below the federal poverty threshold, where 51.8% of African American children and 33.0% of Hispanic children in the same age group were living at or below the federal poverty level.

Now therefore be it resolved that the City Manager is directed to evaluate the impact that existing policies and practices have on equity and develop tools to use across City departments and during the budget process has the potential to address equity challenges in the City of Austin. (Adopted May 7, 2015)




Racial equity is the condition when race no longer predicts a person's quality of life outcomes in our community. The City recognizes that race is the primary determinant of social equity and therefore we begin the journey toward social equity with this definition.

The City of Austin recognizes historical and structural disparities and a need for alleviation of these wrongs by critically transforming its institutions and creating a culture of equity.

City of Austin Equity Office. 

Voyage to Soulsville
John Fisher, Muralist
Austin, Texas





The Strategy: *Call and Response*

Inspired by the age-old African musical tradition of call and response, MJR Partners' proprietary approach to building sustainable community-based solutions is multi-dimensional and collaborative. In our work, we use call-and-response methods to optimize and empower democratic participation across all settings. In contrast, the European classical-music dynamic typically involves a single work written by one person and performed by others for an audience's passive consumption. These are vastly different engagement styles.

This call-and-response technique not only involves but requires, active, spontaneous and free participation of its audience. A caller raises a song, and the audience responds. Responses serve to affirm and unify the message of the song.

In town hall-style meetings, one-on-one conversations and interviews across a broad spectrum of stakeholders, the MJR Partners team prompts community conversation with questions, "the call" for ideas, understanding and perceptions. Our job is to listen, investigate and report back to the community what we hear. This data is blended with research on funding patterns and synthesized to develop "responses" and recommendations.

Getting Started

TWO CRITICAL FIRST STEPS

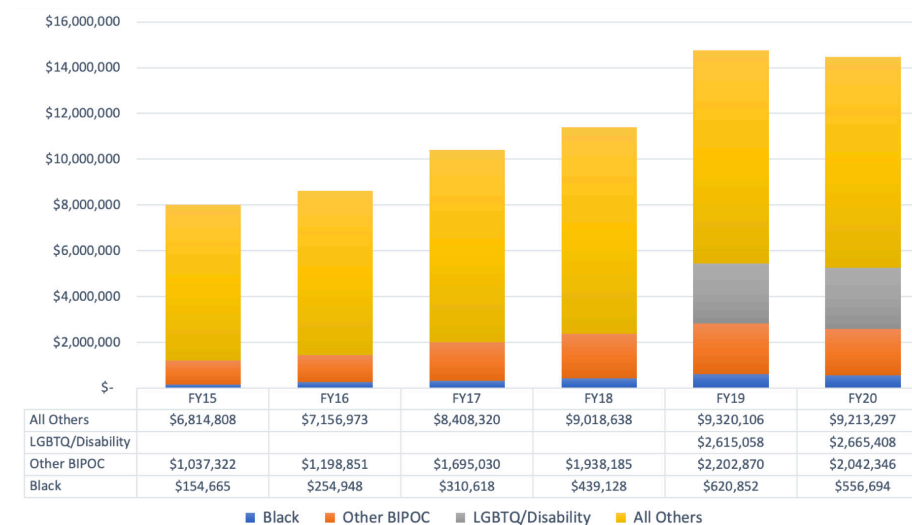
ONE: The Cultural Equity Audit of the Agency

This exercise consists of confidential one-on-one conversations with staff members to gather input on their personal understanding of equity and their view of how the agency's work moves the needle toward fairness.

TWO: Review and Analysis of the Data

In this case, numbers show the incontestable truth about how arts funding was distributed in Austin. The graph below was shared often during the community engagement period. It was particularly helpful in conversations with leaders of large budget organizations who feared change.

HISTORIC CULTURAL FUNDING



Data gathered from past and current contractors shows an acute disparity in the distribution of funds. In FY20 alone Black cultural contractors account for 4% of total dollars awarded and other BIPOC contractors account for only 14%. White cultural contractors account of the majority for funds awarded at 64%. This inequitable distribution of City funds, if not corrected, would further exacerbate the economic crisis facing many of the City's most vulnerable cultural contractors.



"In the pre-Hispanic world, everything in the life of the people was artistic, from the palaces and temples which are monumental works of sculpture, with their magnificent frescoes that amaze everyone peering at them in the jungle, down to the most humble pot used daily, and the children's toys, and the stone to grind grain. Everything was a work of art, ninety-nine percent of the time, a masterpiece."

Diego Rivera
1886-1957

The Process: *Listening*

Effectively operationalizing change requires a complete understanding of the ways that communities engage in artmaking and the creative process. Our framework is based on a community engagement process that places a premium on trust and is a blend of science and art. The science calls for knowledge of public policy, cultural anthropology, organizational development and behavioral science. The art comes from understanding the fears and concerns of the cultural sector and having the facilitation skills and sensitivity to apply the science. For example, every dialogue session should allow space for frustrations to be aired, respecting that multiple viewpoints are necessary for healthy debate.

Every community has its own set of norms that guide how it will react to and accept change. Consider these 10 working rules

The Process: *Discovery Steps*

1. **ACKNOWLEDGE** that bias, structural racism, and funding inequities are systemic.
2. **SHARE AND DISCUSS** findings from the Cultural Equity Audit to identify and understand "gatekeeping" and microaggressions.
3. **CREATE AND MAINTAIN** an aggressive meeting schedule to reveal discrepancies in policy vs. practice.
4. **ALIGN** terms and definitions through consistent communications with the City's Equity Office.
5. **INVOLVE AND CONSULT** the Law Department, Council Offices and Risk Management Department.
6. **ENGAGE** with City Council-appointed advisory groups and seek their advice throughout the process.
7. **REPORT** often and on many platforms community engagement data to keep the public and elected officials updated. This will help understand who is not at the table.
8. **PUBLISH**, to the extent possible, ideas and concerns raised during community dialogue sessions, neighborhood listening sessions, and one-on-one meetings.
9. **RESPECT** the opinions of the audience and resist the temptation to debate or choose sides.
10. **STAY** focused on the main thing.



The Results: *Scalable Cultural Transformation*

After collecting and reviewing the data and input, MJR Partners collaborated with agency staff to redesign funding programs, focusing on three specific guiding principles:

1. Invest in the creative sector to nurture and protect the artistic expressions of Austin's racially and culturally diverse communities.
2. Build upon Austin's existing cultural infrastructure.
3. Operationalize a plan to redistribute the City's financial resources designated for arts, culture and heritage, with an intentional focus on equity and inclusion.

And building on three years of research, community feedback, and evaluation of past programming strengths and weaknesses, three new funding programs replaced long-standing practices.

NEXUS

Nurture new and emerging applicants by funding creative public projects developed through community activation and/or collaboration.

ELEVATE

Creative and administrative expenses of cultural producers that amplify equity and prioritize inclusive programming.

THRIVE

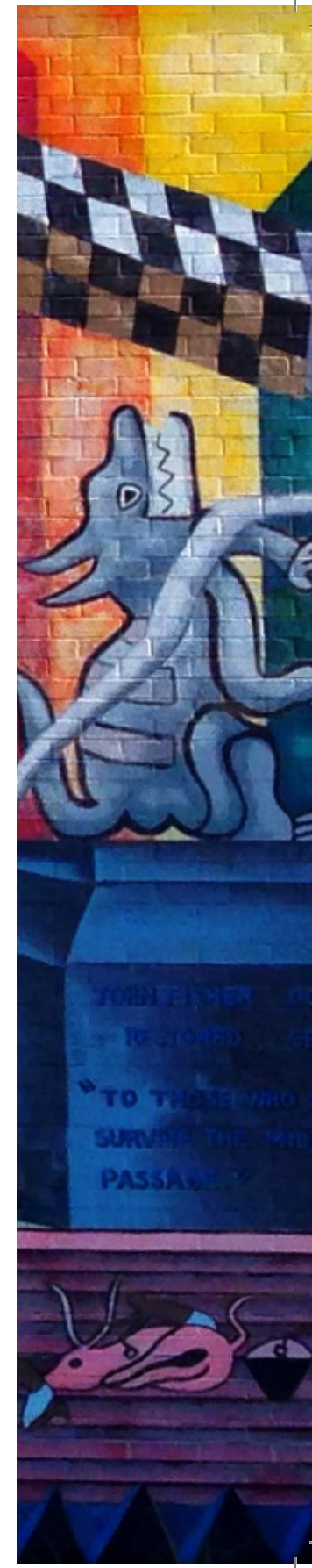
Focused investment to sustain and grow arts organizations that are deeply rooted in, and reflective of Austin's diverse cultures.

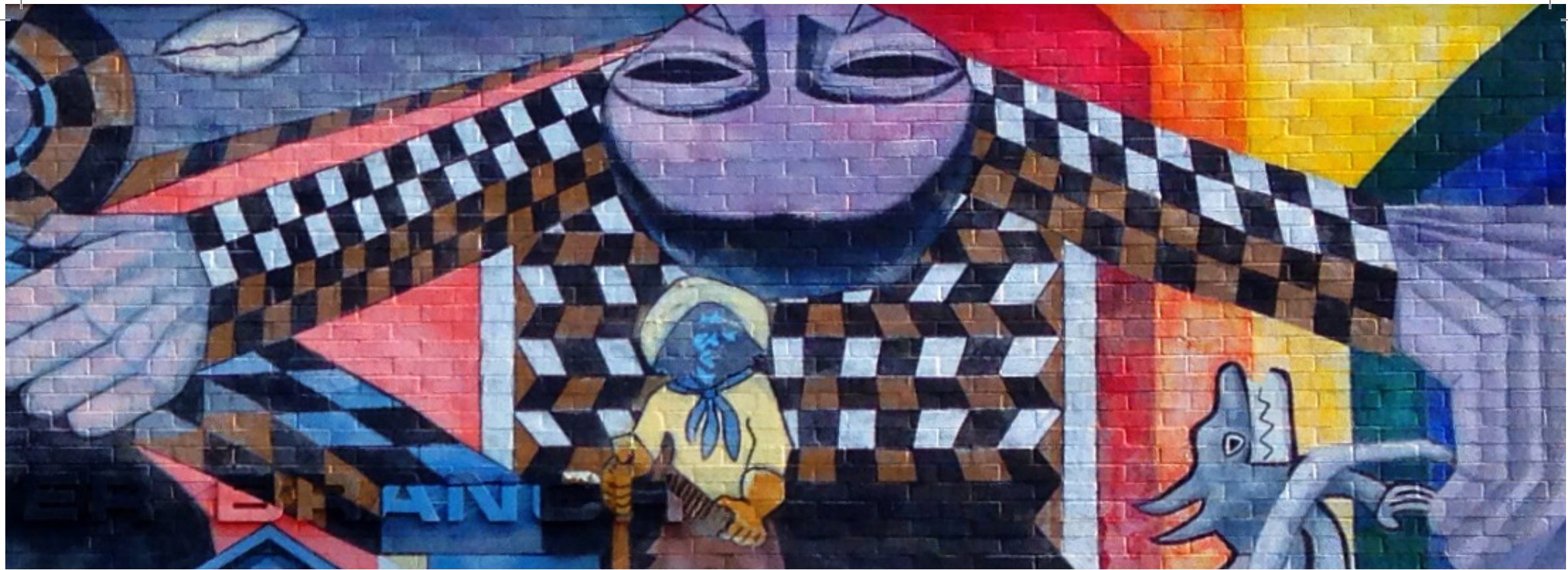
The Path Forward: *Next Steps*

Finally, equity means fairness. Grant programs that have existed to provide annual project funding to "emerging" organizations or project-based funding distributed to artists of color and BOPIC-led organizations does not contribute to the development of institutions. Cultural Institutions have direct access to resources that support the organization's permanence and growth. We define a cultural institution as an organization whose assets include paid administrative and artistic staff (including dedicated development and marketing staff), diversity of funders that provide operating support grants, corporate sponsorship and donors, earned income streams, cash reserve, membership to industry networks and a permanent office and programming location.

When a community faces the question of fairness, several consistent points surface:

- More data collection, more meetings, more research or new terminology will not change arts funding patterns.
- "Transparency derailment" will surface a strategy to undermine the process.
- Implicit bias and the tendency for bias must not prevail.
- The journey toward racial equity will reveal the fragmentation of the arts community.
- The challenge of crafting a blueprint for achieving fairness remains a local matter.
- Entitlement is a practice, not a policy.





Acknowledgements

We would like to express our profound appreciation to the residents of the City of Austin—the curious creators, the innovators, the risk-takers, the adventure-seekers, citizen activists, and organizational leaders—who shared their time and thoughts in service of this review process. Their participation in workshops, listening sessions, surveys, meetings, and one-on-one conversations helped synthesize and elevate this work in meaningful ways.

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Margie has a 40-year portfolio in arts management accomplishments. She held the positions of Executive Director and General Manager for Cultural Affairs, respectively, in Dallas and Los Angeles, before being appointed by the Ford Foundation as Program Officer for Arts and Culture based in Lagos, Nigeria. She is currently a Consultant in Residence for Mid-America Arts Alliance based in Kansas City, Missouri, and for the Western States Arts Federation (WESTAF) in Denver, Colorado. Margie contributes to arts policy in the areas of public participation, racial equity in grant-making and leadership development. She has served as a faculty member for WESTAF's Emerging Leaders of Color training program for 10 years, which in 2022, became The National Leaders of Color Fellowship for BIPOC mid-career arts administrators. Margie understands the importance of representation in the equitable distribution of public funds and brings top-level skills and experience to community engagement and inclusiveness in cultural planning and implementation design. She holds an MFA in theatre from Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas.

