

Community Engagement: A Primer

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Introduction

Colorado Creative Industries states that 33% of the score of a Creative District that seeks certification from the State of Colorado depends upon the degree of “community buy-in.” What is community buy-in? For purposes of this paper, this term is synonymous with “community engagement.”

This paper considers two questions:

- What is community engagement/community buy-in?
- Where do creative district organizers start, in order to begin the process of meaningfully engaging their community?

Every community is unique and what a creative district's engagement with its community will look like will depend a great deal on what its leadership is able to discover about that community.

The community is also what makes the creative district unique. While a district will be developed around a particular place, and that place may have unique architectural, physical or historical features, buildings are only the frame on which one builds. It is the people who live, work and play in a district that give it life and color.

Identifying the Community

A community is a collection of individuals with some commonality, something they share which gives them a feeling of fellowship. A creative district is a geographic community; what people share is the block or neighborhood they live in. But within this block or neighborhood may be a variety of stakeholders who see themselves united by the threads of where they live, where they work, what language they or their grandparents speak, the kind of art they make. To think of them as a single, monolithic entity can be misleading and does those communities a disservice. Here's an example: in Gunnison, Colorado, there's a substantial population of Cora Indian people, from Mexico: they do not speak Spanish. Or, people whose first language is Spanish are of very different cultural backgrounds if they are from Spain, Puerto Rico or Guatemala. It's important to pay attention.

Even in the smallest of towns and districts, there will be different communities with different perspectives and different interests. These will overlap to a greater or lesser extent, but it is important to understand who these groups are and what their interests are. Part of the role of the creative district leader is curating/creating/animating an arts district to bring the various, often diverse, communities served by the district together, helping to make it vibrant and sustainable.

One may say, “There is no diversity here.” But, there is likely to be diversity within that community even if, per the census, people “look alike.” What about distinctions among people of different age groups? Legacy residents and newcomers? Year-round residents and second homeowners? People of different economic means?

Think about the creative district, and the sub-communities that comprise it. Who are they?

A good starting point will be to determine what the creative district organizers “already know.” List all of the relevant communities of stakeholders that immediately come to mind. Some examples might include the creative community, the surrounding residents, the non-arts business community, the broader municipal or geographical district, even people particularly interested in the district's unique qualities/arts/characteristics but who do not live in, or even particularly near, the district. What do district organizers actually know about these communities and what can be discovered with some basic research?

Start with facts and avoid making assumptions about opinions. As the creative district leadership begins to connect and converse with people, they will voice their own attitudes, values, hesitations and aspirations, but understanding a bit about who they are will help leaders better understand their perspectives and how to go about initiating the conversation. As leaders find out more about these communities, they may find other communities they did not know existed. They may find that groups they thought of as distinct have so much overlap that they could be considered singularly.

Who are the people who live in the creative district? Good demographic information is available on the Internet (for example, from the US Census Bureau <http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/index.xhtml>) and the local government may have good information available as well. Are they mostly young? Older? Do they have children? Do they have a long history in the neighborhood, or is your district comprised mainly of people new to the area? Do many people live in your district, or is it mostly commercial? What languages are spoken? Do they belong to a neighborhood association? What businesses are located in the district? Who owns them? Do those people live in the district? Are there business associations they are a part of? Who are the major property owners in the district? The school district is a good place for information about community cultural diversity, as well – they may know better than anyone else how many different first languages are spoken at home.

A good community self-study process is found in the tool kit; it's Ewell/Vega's "Community Profile Process." There are things that are typically not easy to find in written or online materials: this self-study process invites a researcher to learn, "Who is the third-largest cultural group in the community? Who are its leaders? Where do they meet? What medium (or community bulletin board) is the best way to circulate information to that community?"

It can be helpful to identify existing community groups in and around the district. These might include resident associations, business associations, religious organizations, such as churches, schools or social service organizations. They may all have widely different perspectives, but all are self-identified communities. Whom do they serve or represent? Are there gaps in that coverage?

Who else is in the district? Spend some time walking around the district at different times of the day and on both weekdays and weekends and see who is there.

Initiating the conversation

To thrive, a district needs the support of the wider community. To support the district, community members need to understand how they are, and can be, part of that district and how the district will be relevant to their own lives.

Community engagement is a process of mutual learning. Leaders might learn something about the community through a survey, and they might learn something about the district through informative flyers that creative district organizers distribute, but neither of those can substitute for the generative energy of dialogue. Through the give and take of an exchange of views and ideas, we often find new ideas as well as finding our own tightly held views evolving.

A next step might be to initiate a series of conversations with the communities that have been identified. This will help leaders to better understand the community and develop a fuller picture of the individuals and groups who comprise it, and begin the understanding how those community members can, and should, participate in the district.

As a newer or less-known organization, convening a group can be a challenge for creative district organizers. Working through existing community groups can be a useful strategy: those leaders can draw upon their networks and structures to identify people to attend the meetings. Indeed, who makes the invitation is often the key to participation. As creative district organizers get to know the leadership of the groups within their district, they may find it wise to ask those leaders to make the invitation to come to a convening; indeed, perhaps the convening could be co-sponsored. Reaching out to key players is an important first step as creative district organizers try to assess the landscape and dynamics around them.

Community members will have a lot of demands on their time, including work, family and perhaps other volunteer commitments. Be mindful of this both in scheduling conversations. It may take some trial and error to find the most convenient times for people, and perhaps multiple sessions at different times is the way to get the broadest exposure. For some people, for example, evening hours will be best, while others will have family commitments at that time. Are there other ways to reach out to people who might not be able to attend meetings?

Some individuals might be harder than others for you to access. Language and cultural barriers may exist. Certain sessions may require a translator, or someone who will provide child care. There may be leaders within the community who can offer insights into why it will be difficult for certain members to attend—and how one might be able to effectively approach those community members.

Where meetings or events are held might be meaningful as well. Think about what might be a 'safe' and familiar space for people to be in. Going to people and meeting them in their own surroundings can mean a lot and send an important message about your willingness to hear what they have to say. A story told by a CCI Creative Districts team member is relevant here: "I was at a conference and heard John Malpede speak. He's a theater professional, and he described that his theater was next door to a homeless shelter. He always gave free tickets to the shelter, but never saw its clients in his theater. One day, he forgot his keys to the theater and had to go to the shelter to use the phone. He was chatting with one of the men there, and asked this individual why he never came to the theater. 'Are you comfortable being here?' asked this gentleman. Malpede had to admit that he was not. 'If you are not comfortable in my house,' this homeless man said, 'why do you think I would be comfortable in yours?' This moment changed Malpede, and out of it was born the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) theater." Keep this story in mind when wondering how to engage groups in the creative district – everything begins with dialogue, understanding, and trust-building.

Be mindful of the demands on your community members' time and try to use their time

efficiently. Consider in advance what the goals for these conversations are. What information would the creative district leaders like to share and what questions do they want input on? Carefully structuring these conversations to make them efficient and productive is critical and it can be helpful to bring in a facilitator to lead and manage the conversations. A facilitator can also help creative district leaders better understand what was actually said afterwards. Different facilitators have different techniques, but small group discussions, such as are used in the World Café process (described in another paper in CCI's Creative Districts Tool Kit), can be a useful technique to ensure the conversations are not dominated by a small number of participants.

Pose provocative questions. Generally, the answers received will be only as imaginative as the questions asked. Simple yes/no questions will get simple yes/no answers. So if one asks, "would you like to see more cultural programs in the neighborhood?" the answer will be, "yes". If, on the other hand, one asks, "what cultural programs would make your neighborhood more fun to live in?" or "what would you like to see in the district every day that would make you smile?" the conversations might generate new insights into what the district can become and how the community can be a part of making that happen.

Listen, and keep an open mind. Creative district organizers might hear answers that are not the ones they expected. Keep good written records of what is said and go back over them later. Sometimes, both substantial points and nuances become clearer as notes are reviewed later.

Building relationships

Building relationships takes time. Not everyone is going to be as enthusiastic as the creative district leadership team is, straight off the bat. Part of building a relationship is building trust, and as people begin to trust district leaders, and feel they are heard and that the project responds to their needs, their perceptions and ideas about the project will evolve. Don't be surprised when the person seemingly least supportive suddenly becomes one of the creative district's most ardent advocates. People who were seemingly never available to attend any of your meetings might, as the project develops and the creative district's commitment to the community becomes apparent, suddenly be more available.

Perhaps more importantly, as creative district organizers successfully engage with the community and learn what its people have to bring to the district, their own perspectives might, and probably should, change as well.

So what is community engagement?

Now, with an idea of who comprises the community and a growing understanding of what the community wants your district to be, creative district organizers can begin to ask how the community is going to be part of making that vision a reality. At the same time, they can also begin to ask how the district can strengthen the community.

At its essence, community engagement is about working collaboratively with a group of people who are connected by an arts district to make that district successful. How that looks in implementation will be unique to each community, because what their district will look like will be shaped by that community's people - and they will help show how to make it a reality.

Fred Glick is an arts administrator, teacher, writer and community organizer currently living in Denver, Colorado. His career has involved everything from being the booking manager for the Lar Lubovich Dance Company to managing a refugee food program in Swaziland to helping design methods of collecting health data in New Delhi slums. He has been a facilitator for the Lutheran Development Service in Swaziland, and chaired a committee in London whose purpose was giving neighborhood residents a say in how their community was policed. He currently serves on the boards of the Academy for Urban Learning, a DPS charter high school serving students with multiple at-risk factors and Wonderbound, a Denver-based contemporary dance company, and co-chairs the Operations and Infrastructure Committee of the Aurora Human Rights Center.