LESSONS
from the NEW YORK CITY CULTURAL AGENDA FUND
Over four years, the Cultural Agenda Fund made 89 grants to 67 groups totaling $2.27 million. It helped build a broader commitment to a fairer and more equitable arts ecosystem in New York City and a more deeply connected network of arts organizations, equipping them with new skills to make their voices heard.
In 2014, New York’s art community faced a moment of opportunity. Bill de Blasio had won the mayorality with the promise of healing the City’s deep divisions of race, class, and income. Meanwhile, the City Council was drafting legislation to develop the first-ever cultural plan, offering a chance to create “a roadmap to guide the future of arts and culture in NYC.”

The opportunity couldn’t have come at a better time for the arts sector. Many groups were still struggling to recover from the great recession. The sector reflected the systemic inequities that affected the entire City. And many questioned whether arts and culture would be a priority for the new administration.

New York’s arts and cultural institutions attract millions of visitors each year, but global prestige masked some local challenges.

- A small number of agencies received the bulk of City funding, leaving hundreds of groups and communities under-resourced.
- The cultural workforce did not represent the diverse demographics of New York City.
- Members of the robust but heterogeneous arts community did not have a strong network through which they could establish common ground—especially when it came to issues of equity.

The New York Community Trust brought together a small group of funders and advocates to figure out how the arts community could play a role in shaping the City’s cultural plan. The New York City Cultural Agenda Fund, a funder collaborative, grew out of the group’s recognition that New York City needed a strong and vocal advocacy community with a deep understanding of equity to effect change. Led by The New York Community Trust and Lambent Foundation, the Cultural Agenda Fund’s goals were to strengthen advocacy, influence policy, and advance equity by ensuring that small and diverse arts groups were valued.

About the Funder Collaborative

By joining forces, funders leverage the resources of many to tackle larger agendas, tougher issues, or longer-term challenges than they could take on alone. Donors pool their funds and make decisions collaboratively. The Cultural Agenda Fund members became a learning community, building their knowledge so they could work more effectively as a group. The funders included:

- Booth Ferris Foundation
- Robert Sterling Clark Foundation
- Lambent Foundation
- The New York Community Trust
- Stavros Niarchos Foundation
- Robert Rauschenberg Foundation
- Rockefeller Brothers Fund
- David Rockefeller Fund
The Cultural Agenda Fund pursued three strategies to advance its goals.

1. Add knowledge and perspective to the cultural planning process.

2. Advance a racial equity agenda by creating a network of equity organizers.

3. Build a more robust advocacy community.

While the strategies intersected and strengthened one another, this report will look at how the Fund advanced each strategy as well as key accomplishments and lessons learned.

Adding Knowledge and Perspective to the Cultural Planning Process

New York City’s Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) was charged with developing the new cultural plan. The Cultural Agenda Fund invested in projects that shaped the results but were outside of the City’s budget.

The Cultural Agenda Fund, along with the Surdna Foundation, supported research on the relationship between arts and culture and social wellbeing. Researchers from the University of Pennsylvania’s Social Impact of the Arts Project found that the presence of arts and cultural assets has a measurable impact on health outcomes, school effectiveness, and personal security.

The Cultural Agenda Fund also supported a research fellow from the Center for Urban Research at the City University of New York, who worked with the DCLA and the Department of Education. The researcher found that the percentage of English language learners at a school correlated more strongly with lower levels of arts education than other likely factors, including poverty rates. As a result, the City prioritized arts education in schools with high populations of students learning English.
DCLA Commissioner Tom Finkelpearl contracted with Hester Street, an urban planning, design, and development nonprofit, to lead the planning process. The Cultural Agenda Fund helped local groups organize workshops and programs for hard-to-reach communities, including immigrants and New Yorkers living with HIV/AIDS. Nisha Baliga, who managed the process for Hester Street, noted that “people knew and trusted the local organizations gathering community input, so they were more comfortable and likely to share their opinions with them.”

The Cultural Agenda Fund also helped nonprofits write and submit papers, adding their expertise and perspectives to the planning process. Commissioner Finkelpearl pointed out that external foundation funding gave groups more independence to make strong recommendations. “They did not feel beholden to the government,” he said.

When controlled for race, ethnicity, and economic status, the presence of a significant concentration of cultural assets in neighborhoods marked by concentrated disadvantage significantly corresponds with the following trends.

**RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA’S SOCIAL IMPACT OF THE ARTS REPORT**

- ↑ 18% kids scoring in the top stratum on English and math exams
- ↓ 3-5% individuals suffering from diabetes, hypertension or obesity
- ↓ 14% cases of child abuse and neglect
- ↓ 25% teen pregnancies
- ↓ 18% the felony crime rate
Advancing a Racial Equity Agenda

The Cultural Agenda Fund invested in a series of programs to build grantee capacity to address racial equity in their own organizations and across the sector. Many groups dealt with inequity on a daily basis. “You can see it in who is getting funding, who is getting hired, who is getting board seats, whose art is getting seen,” said Jennifer Wright Cook, executive director of The Field, one of the early grantees of the Fund.

Early on, the Cultural Agenda Fund hosted a series of four workshops on advocacy and equity. The Fund worked with Race Forward, The Opportunity Agenda, i2i Experience, and Hester Street to lead the sessions for 49 arts advocates. While these workshops were helpful, feedback was mixed. Each session had a separate topic, and some were more useful than others. “It was difficult to see the through line that connected them all,” said one grantee. Most important, the cultural organizations and funders agreed that equity issues were paramount and required more attention.

Grantees identified a need to focus on equity in funding and on normalizing conversations about structural racism. In response, the Cultural Agenda Fund issued a Request for Proposals from trainers to provide in-depth racial equity coaching and workshops. The resulting Racial Equity in the Arts Innovation Lab at Race Forward is one of the most significant legacies of the Fund. The Lab sparked interest around the country. Grantmakers in the Arts, the national affinity group for arts funders, uses it as a case study. While the program has been acclaimed as a national model, it is worth noting that demand was not high; nearly every arts group that applied to attend got in.

The Cultural Agenda Fund’s donor committee learned quickly that advancing a racial equity agenda required learning and evolving on their part as well. The donors held long discussions to develop a shared understanding of the implications of a racial equity lens for their work.

Building a More Robust Advocacy Community

New York is home to more than 4,700 nonprofit arts organizations ranging from well-established, multimillion-dollar institutions to low-budget, cutting-edge groups. It is no surprise that this disparate community lacked a clear advocacy voice. The Cultural Agenda Fund filled the gap in numerous ways.

“Our first goal was to make the advocacy community visible to each other, to make introductions, illuminate the various practices, encourage people to work together,” said Michelle Coffey, executive director of Lambent Foundation. Grantees were urged to collaborate on proposals and share information. Several convenings strengthened advocacy capacity in the sector.

The Cultural Agenda Fund also provided a grant to support the merger of two small arts advocacy groups, the New York City Arts Coalition and One Percent for Culture, so that they could form a stronger organization with a unified strategy—New Yorkers for Culture & Arts. The new agency met with constituent groups and identified priorities that align with the cultural plan’s implementation.
With five daylong workshops and tailored small group coaching, grantees designed racial equity work plans and tested them in their workplaces, then refined them.

When Race Forward was to regrant money from the Cultural Agenda Fund to implement the refined plans, the participating arts groups directed that all funds go to the smallest groups facing the most significant inequity.

Modeled in part by the work of the City of Seattle’s Office of Arts and Culture, the Lab is tailored to New York’s arts community. Arts groups of all sizes and stages could apply to attend. To make the Lab more accessible, participants received stipends and childcare.

The Innovation Lab equipped participants to address racial justice. “There is no silver bullet for dismantling racism. We helped groups build the muscle to understand and institutionalize racial equity practices,” said Race Forward’s Nayantara Sen.
CreateNYC, New York City’s first cultural plan, directly addressed equity. The plan was informed by thousands of arts groups and community members from all parts of the City. “The Cultural Agenda Fund deeply informed the spirit of New York City’s cultural plan,” said Eddie Torres, former deputy commissioner of DCLA and president of Grantmakers in the Arts.

The DCLA began implementing many of the recommendations in the plan, including increasing support in the lower-income neighborhoods identified in the Social Impact of the Arts report, supported by the Fund. The agency’s budget increased from $156 million in 2014 to $212 million in 2020—its largest budget ever.

There are new advocacy-focused relationships across several parts of the City. Small arts groups forged new partnerships, enabling them to meld their voices and deliver their advocacy messages more forcefully. Internationally renowned museums attended training sessions alongside small community arts centers. This led to new relationships and fresh potential for collaboration.

The Cultural Agenda Fund created a valuable model for building racial equity practices in the arts sector. The Racial Equity in the Arts Innovation Lab has become a flagship program of Race Forward’s Narrative, Arts, and Culture program, garnering national attention. Hester Street is also intentionally building racial justice training into its work with other cohorts.

But there are continued headwinds. The trail-blazing cultural plan did not come with a budget that would pay for its full implementation. Many of the recommendations developed through Cultural Agenda Fund grants did not make it into the final version of the plan (although all are available online). Many of these ideas were included in the People’s Cultural Plan, an alternative set of policy recommendations created by a diverse coalition of artists and cultural workers.

The arts advocacy infrastructure is stabilizing, but financial support for advocacy groups is a challenge in the arts sector as elsewhere.
Lessons for Grantmakers

- **Be prepared to learn from and with your grantees.** “When you open the door to equity you have to be ready for hard conversations. We received some unanticipated but healthy critiques, and we were challenged to think about participatory decision-making,” said Kerry McCarthy, vice president for philanthropic initiatives at The New York Community Trust.

- **Keep focused on your goals.** Recognize that you can’t pivot in response to every suggestion without hindering your ability to achieve your overarching goals. Clear and open lines of communication will make it easier to find the right balance.

- **Recognize that not all programs will be a fit for every grantee.** Some of the early convenings of the Cultural Agenda Fund were valuable to newer arts leaders but less useful to more established leaders.

- **Take intentional steps to make programs accessible to small, low-budget organizations.** The Cultural Agenda Fund was able to fund grantees to attend its sponsored trainings, making it possible for many to participate who otherwise would have been unable to do so. The Fund also made grants to smaller groups that otherwise fell outside of the guidelines of the participating funders.

- **Give it time.** The Cultural Agenda Fund developed a multi-year, multi-tiered experience that included training, coaching, experimenting, and planning.

- **Create an environment for ongoing learning and risk-taking on the part of both grantees and funders.** Invest in great trainers and coaches who can work with grantees. Then acknowledge your role as a funder and stay out of their way so that grantees have a safe space to express their views.

- **Use a funder collaborative when it makes sense to do so.** The collective nature of the collaborative will make it easier to take on systemic challenges that are hard for any one agency to tackle alone.
Forward Momentum

With the conclusion of the Cultural Agenda Fund, The New York Community Trust is taking the next steps to support equity in the arts sector. Its next-generation funder collaborative—the Mosaic Network and Fund—will direct more resources to arts groups that are led by, created for, and accountable to people of color.

The Mosaic Fund’s values are rooted in racial equity (and recognition of the need to also address other forms of oppression). Its advisory committee includes both funders and nonprofit arts leaders working collaboratively. “If we want to tackle advocacy, it must be rooted in values of equity. Otherwise, advocates will wind up perpetuating the status quo rather than making real change,” said McCarthy.

The New York Community Trust

The Trust is a public charity and a grantmaking foundation dedicated to improving the lives of residents of New York City and its suburbs. It brings together individuals, families, foundations, and businesses to build a better community and support nonprofits that make a difference. It applies knowledge, creativity, and resources to the most challenging issues in an effort to ensure meaningful opportunities and a better quality of life for all New Yorkers, today and tomorrow. For more information, visit us at nycommunitytrust.org.
New York City Cultural Agenda Fund Grantees

Advocacy Institute
Alice Austen House
Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts
AMERINDA
Artist Volunteer Center
Arts & Democracy Project
Arts East New York
Asian American Arts Alliance
Asian American Writers’ Workshop
BRIC Arts | Media | Bklyn
Bronx Council on the Arts
Bronx Museum of the Arts
Brooklyn Academy of Music
Brooklyn Arts Council
Brooklyn Children’s Museum
Brooklyn Museum
Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute
Center for Arts Education
Chamber Music America
Children’s Museum of the Arts
Dance/NYC
Design Trust for Public Space
Disability/Arts/NYC Task Force
El Museo del Barrio
El Puente de Williamsburg
Elders Share the Arts
En Foco
The Field
Flushing Town Hall
Gina Gibney Dance
Global Action Project
The Graduate Center of the City University of New York
Groundswell Community Mural Project
Harlem Arts Alliance
Harlem Stage
HB Studio
Hester Street Collaborative
Ifetayo Cultural Arts Academy
Jack Arts
King Manor Museum
Lark Play Development Center
Laundromat Project
League of Independent Theater
Lewis Latimer Historic House Museum
Loisaida
Lower Manhattan Cultural Council
Martin E. Segal Theatre Center
Museum of Chinese in America
Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts
National Museum of the American Indian – New York
Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts New York
New York City Arts Coalition
New York Foundation for the Arts
One Percent for Culture
The Opportunity Agenda
Park Avenue Armory
People’s Climate Arts
Printed Matter
The Public Theater
Queens Museum
Race Forward
Spaceworks
Staten Island Arts
Staten Island Museum
Theatre of the Oppressed
University of Pennsylvania’s Social Impact of the Arts Project
White Columns