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The Creative Economy Practitioner's Toolkit: Taking Advantage of Campus and Community Resources

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The idea that arts and culture are valuable to local, state and national economies is not new. Performing and visual arts can play an integral role in economic development where the creative economy approach links the creative process to a wide range of economy-supporting activities. We discuss how colleges and universities can foster creative economies, and present specific strategies to build creative economies in non-metropolitan settings.*

The role of colleges and universities in fostering creative economies

While small towns and cities face particular challenges in building a creative economy, local colleges and universities are a resource community leaders can draw upon, an asset that is particularly important in Upstate NY with one of the highest densities of higher educational institutions in the U.S. According to a survey of administrative officials and faculty from 33 upstate NY colleges and universities, the most important factor influencing engagement about the arts between educational institutions and local communities was support and endorsement from the College or University President. This support enabled staff and faculty to undertake projects knowing that they had institutional backing for their efforts.

Survey respondents identified key obstacles to successful collaboration: inadequate performance and exhibition space, insufficient information about whom to contact at the college, insurance concerns, and inadequate staff for collaborative projects. Suggestions for improving campus-community partnerships included: a central office to support co-sponsorship, special dedicated funds to encourage joint programming, a physical presence of the college in the community, college staff dedicated to outreach and collaboration, and college connections with local arts or cultural councils.

Strategies for Building Creative Economies

Using the survey results, we developed a set of strategies for building campus-community connections around creative economy goals. The strategies can be used to initiate con-

versation about creative economy initiatives, help navigate the challenges of bridging among participants, and provide inspiration through case studies, resources, and reports.

Strategy 1: Setting up an initial stakeholder gathering.

A stakeholder gathering can be used to gather information, generate new ideas, and challenge conventional attitudes and assumptions. Traditional leaders need to be involved, but the roles they take during the initial gathering should use their expertise while harnessing the energy of new participants. The goals of this strategy are to develop knowledge and leadership skills, to enable the group to develop goals and a plan, and to include diverse groups and interests.

• *Putting Strategies into Action*

It is important to get a commitment from community leaders who have a positive reputation and rely on them to suggest other contacts. Garner their help in developing an agenda for a broad-based stakeholder gathering. Ask them to describe past successes and obstacles to community cultural programs.

• *Challenges*

It may be challenging to provide adequate discussion time, to find a way to acknowledge individual and group contributions and develop trust within the group. Positive outcomes are not always immediate.

Strategy 2: Bridging Town and Gown with Service Learning Arts Projects

Utilizing the energy of students through service learning is an excellent strategy to promote campus/community relationships. Courses offered by landscape and architecture departments can define the town entry, design department courses can help develop signage to identify the town or co-sponsor arts events, planning departments can design long-term economic development strategies or develop a historic site to encourage tourism. Business departments can offer marketing advice to small arts-related businesses. Although these projects are a major commitment for both professor and community contacts, students' enthusiastic engagement and the creative outcomes are worth the effort.

- *Putting Strategies into Action*

Service learning is distinct from “public service”. It is a partnership between students and an organization offering a real-life learning opportunity. Finding the right people to be involved in the project, with the necessary vision, leadership skills, and energy to conduct a successful collaboration is critical. The impetus for a project can come from students, organizations, or a faculty member but its success depends on all three. Careful collaborative planning, realistic goals and timelines which mesh the limits of the academic calendar with the community collaborator’s timeline are essential.

- *Challenges*

Service learning projects require substantial administrative coordination, oversight, and extensive planning. Leaders need tolerance for change and fluctuation in the quality of students and their interests from year to year. Matching student learning and community needs sometimes leads to unexpected, but interesting outcomes. The semester-length courses can often be incompatible with organizational time lines and agendas.

Strategy 3: Capitalizing on Student-led Community Arts Projects

Entering into partnerships with students has cost, speed and flexibility advantages. Working with students can infuse “traditional operating procedure” with a strong dose of “out of the box” thinking. Students are typically energetic, may have valuable skills in research methods, writing, specialized computer software, and design, and can provide community partners with access to on-campus resources. Initial relationships with students may develop into regular internships at the collaborating organization or students’ long-term commitment as employees, volunteers or board members.

- *Putting Strategies into Action*

Campus community service and volunteer clearinghouses provide resources to identify informal opportunities for students in potential collaborating organizations. Meaningful projects for students need focus and clear expectations. Formalizing relationships as internships or temporary employees is one approach. Involve students in organizational meetings, ask for their opinions, and listen to their ideas. Help students build on their impulses to be involved and creatively engaged and think twice about the impulse to say “no” when they want to pursue a new direction.

- *Challenges*

Long-term commitment and planning may prove challenging since students typically only hold leadership positions for the academic year. Supervising faculty and community partners need to be prepared to provide supervision, mentorship, planning, and focus, with clearly defined expectations for communication and follow-through. Working with

students requires patience due to their limited experience, enthusiasm, and occasional lack of communication skills.

Strategy 4: Research Collaborations with Higher Education Partners

Creative business and arts administrators can find value in accessing the research capacity of universities. Students and faculty are often seeking “real-life” experiences to apply their skills in research, business planning, marketing, and information systems – a viable alternative to hiring expensive consultants. Students and faculty can help develop proposals to funding agencies,. Partnerships can enhance recruitment for volunteers, new board members, and paid staff.

- *Putting Strategies into Action*

Websites of local or regional colleges and universities and community organizations can be used to identify on-going research and programs of interest. The local newspaper and campus publications may identify people who have common interests and specific talents. The Cooperative Extension System has offices in almost every county of NYS, extending university research results into the community. Initiate contact rather than waiting for academic collaborators to come to you. Figure out how research collaboration can benefit the university and your organization and propose an arrangement. Look for distinctive programs that require students to complete a community service project as part of their educational experience.

- *Challenges*

In research collaborations, we face the challenge of balancing power, objectives and outcomes. Make sure everyone gets something useful from the arrangement. Identify the person in each organization who can express and interpret needs, assets and goals for the collaboration. Be clear about the time frame for the activities and modify if necessary. An effective project design will meet specific needs and also establish or build successful, long-term relationships.

Conclusions

These strategies can help bridge the gap between interest in the creative economy as a concept and the ability to implement workable relationships between campus and community. They are particularly addressed to non-urban practitioners and college and university personnel to provide ideas to those who may feel isolated in a sparsely populated area. In our expanded CaRDI Report*, we build on these strategies, adding examples of successes and challenges to the four strategy areas. The ultimate goal is to build local and regional creative economies that reflect the centrality of people, express the quality of place, and contribute to sustainable economic development.

*Please be sure to check the CaRDI website for an upcoming CaRDI Report on this same topic, providing greater detail, case study examples of these strategies, and references.



