

Arts and Culture

Partnering for Equity in the Arts

Issues of access, privilege, and chronic underfunding combine to drown out too many voices.

<https://nff.org/story/partnering-equity-arts>

The Need

Financial strength and adaptability for historically underfunded nonprofits

Our Response

Consulting and financing for a more equitable arts sector

In early 2014, **Ars Nova Workshop** had more than 10 years of experience hosting concerts and events, relationships with world-renowned jazz and experimental artists, access to performance spaces and audiences, and name recognition well beyond Philadelphia. But it was limping along on a shoestring budget – its founder and executive director, Mark Christman, still worked full-time elsewhere to support himself.

The **William Penn Foundation** asked NFF to help Ars Nova get financially strong enough to qualify for its grants. With the foundation's support, NFF consultants, Christman (now the full-time director) and Ars Nova board members embarked on a three-year project to dig into and stabilize the nonprofit's finances. In 2017, William Penn awarded Ars Nova a grant – plus a bonus for its good financial health.

Achieving financial strength and adaptability is a **top concern** for many nonprofits, but certain arts and culture nonprofits face an additional funding challenge: Those that are smaller, rural, led by people of color, or primarily serve people of color have historically been underfunded in comparison to larger, urban and suburban organizations – which tend to be led by, and serve primarily, white people. In the cultural conversation, this dynamic can serve to further amplify the voices most heard and drown out others.

One recent **study** found that most foundation funding goes to large arts organizations – those with budgets of \$5 million or more. Data from NFF's 2018 State of the Nonprofit Sector Survey add detail to this picture: **47 percent** of responding large arts organizations serve mostly white clients and only **3 percent** are led by a person of color, versus **41 percent** and **16 percent**, respectively, for smaller nonprofits. Only **7 percent** of responding large arts nonprofits exclusively or primarily serve low-income people, compared to **22 percent** of small and mid-sized arts nonprofits; **7 percent** of large arts organizations serve clients in rural areas, versus **28 percent** of smaller organizations.

NFF's work with arts nonprofits directly addresses these broader inequities as well as the specific challenges each organization faces. For example, the Comprehensive Organizational Health Initiative (COHI), the latest chapter of a partnership between NFF and **The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**, specifically supports arts organizations that face systemic funding barriers due to factors like race, geography, and market disruption.

“Common funding practices, like only giving large grants to large organizations, maintain the current situation in which organizations of color do not get their fair share of funding,” said Claire Knowlton, Director, Advisory Services at NFF. “COHI demonstrates one way that foundations can make large grants to small organizations, helping to strengthen their voices with which they share their stories.”

“Art is a medium to have a conversation, and I think that’s ultimately what we do. We have these larger conversations and talk about broader issues in our community,” said Anjee Helstrup-Alvarez, Executive Director of Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana (MACLA), a COHI member that supports art rooted in the Chicano/Latino experience. The initiative’s capital and consulting have helped MACLA focus less on maintenance and more on mission. “We’d been in this mentality of making-do,” Helstrup-Alvarez said, adding that new doors and HVAC repairs have made MACLA’s home more secure and energy efficient, while a marketing consultant is helping artists reach new audiences.

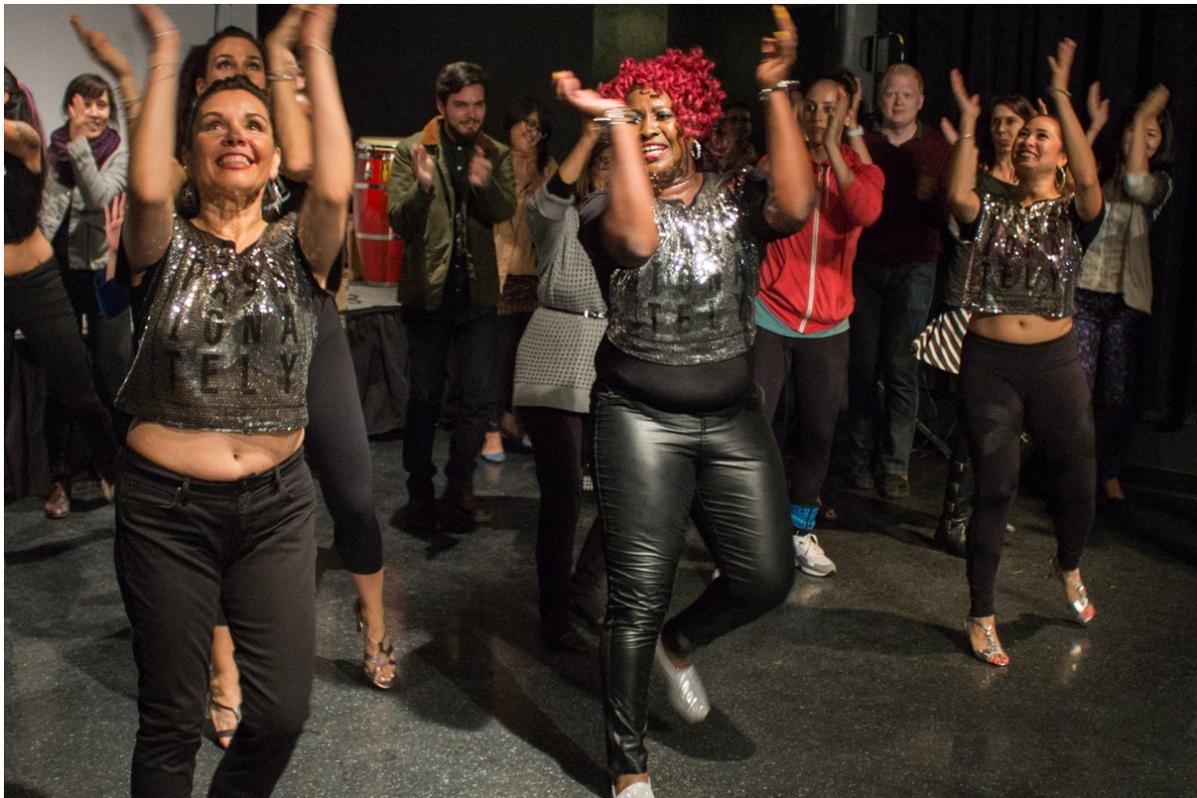


Photo Credit: Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana (MACLA)

COHI work includes:

Leveraging A Network for Equity (LANE), an eight-year collaboration with the **National Performance Network/Visual Artists Network**, seeks to build the

financial and organizational health of performing and visual arts nonprofits that have often been overlooked by large institutions. Some have deteriorating performance and gallery spaces, while others are being priced out – or their audiences displaced – by gentrification. With LANE now in its second phase, a dozen organizations are receiving Mellon funding and NFF consulting to provide, for example, general operating support, address physical disrepair or financial hardship, or adjust how an organization makes and spends money to achieve its mission. The 12 nonprofits are:

- [Carpetbag Theatre](#) (Knoxville, Tenn.)
- [Central District Forum for Art & Ideas](#) (Seattle, Wash.)
- [Coleman Center for the Arts](#) (York, Ala.)
- [Hayti Heritage Center](#) (Durham, N.C.)
- [Junebug Productions](#) (New Orleans)
- [La Peña Cultural Center](#) (Berkeley, Calif.)
- [Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana \(MACLA\)](#) (San Jose, Calif.)
- [Myrna Loy Center](#) (Helena, Mont.)
- [Native American Community Development Institute/All My Relations Arts](#) (Minneapolis)
- [Pangea World Theater](#) (Minneapolis)
- [Su Teatro](#) (Denver)
- [The Theater Offensive](#) (Boston, Mass.)

Managing Organizational Vitality and Endurance (MOVE), a collaboration with [International Association of Blacks in Dance](#) (IABD), aims to strengthen the field of black dance by supporting organizations that have historically been financially marginalized. IABD, along with [Dayton Contemporary Dance Company](#) (Dayton, Ohio); [Philadanco!](#), [The Philadelphia Dance Company](#) (Philadelphia); [Cleo Parker Robinson Dance](#) (Denver); [Dallas Black Dance Theatre](#) (Dallas); and [Lula Washington Dance Theatre](#) (Los Angeles), are receiving change capital and technical assistance to bolster themselves financially. And MOVE is looking at ways to help 25 additional nonprofits to

adapt and thrive by addressing historic barriers, streamlining organizational processes, and increasing collaboration.

Regional art conservation centers once flourished with 35 organizations across the US to preserve and conserve the artistic and historic treasures of local museums and collections. That number has fallen to eight due to disruptive technologies, changing ideas about conservation, and dwindling government and philanthropic funding. NFF is working with the remaining regional conservation centers to see how change capital can help them adapt.

NFF also administers the \$1.1 million [Mellon Loan Fund](#) for Mellon's small and mid-sized arts, heritage, and cultural grantees. These zero-interest loans can be used to bridge funding gaps, weather financial setbacks, and carry out new strategies, giving these organizations access to capital they might not otherwise see due to their size. Since the Fund began in July 2009, more than \$3.8 million has been loaned to 40 organizations across the country.

Learn more about NFF's work to improve the long-term financial health of arts and culture organizations, including [this initiative](#) supported by the [Doris Duke Charitable Foundation](#).

Read more about [our work in the arts](#) and explore arts and culture data from the [State of the Nonprofit Sector Survey](#).

Human Services / Education Story

Expanding the American Promise

Tacoma Community House

Where Money Meets Mission®

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