

*Arts partnering offers metropolitan universities new opportunities to collaborate with local arts organizations for the enrichment of the cultural life in medium size metropolises. This article outlines the basic steps to be taken while moving toward a collaborative relationship. The suggestions are supported by examples from successful short term alliances and continuing relationships. Ways to maintain ongoing collaborations are discussed with practical suggestions drawn from experience. A listing of the major benefits derived from partnering are followed by factors that require attention in order to attain successful outcomes.*

# Arts Partnering

Metropolitan universities with mission statements that include an outreach component intending to enhance the quality of life in their communities have many opportunities through the arts to provide significant collaborative ventures. This is particularly true if the university is located in a medium size population area ranging from 200,000 to 500,000. Rapid changes affecting both universities and most sectors of community life are forcing arts organizations to discover new ways to survive and to become more intrinsically woven into the fabric of daily life. Numerous arts organizations are either considering some form of co-dependency or revamping established liaisons.

Many current issues create the need to seek new alliances between higher education and community arts organizations. The shifting economic, cultural, social, and educational frameworks of our time require university arts facilities to expand their methods of providing community service. It is easy to espouse the idea of partnerships and/or collaborations between higher education and local arts organizations as a major means of supporting cultural activities in the community. The reality of accomplishing such a goal lies in taking a number of carefully planned steps and overcoming the numerous traditional fears held by most arts organizations relating primarily to competition and to identity. Before exploring the challenges of partnering, the established parameters of the setting should be considered.

## The Medium Size Metropolis

The diversity and quality of cultural life in medium size metropolitan areas may be rich and varied. These communities may support various arts organizations including a symphony orchestra, art museum, theater group, dance troupe, opera company, and special children's arts organizations. The arts organizations range from volunteer groups to semi-professional and frequently include one or two professional companies. However, it is difficult for this limited population base to sustain many professional and semi-professional arts organizations since only a relatively small critical mass of arts enthusiasts of approximately two percent regularly attend events. Not all arts devotees go to every type of arts event; it is known that there is limited

crossover from one type of arts patronage to another. Yet the citizenry in these cities desire to have the range of arts amenities that exist in the major cultural centers of our country.

Indeed the demands for diverse arts organizations is supported and even touted by municipal leaders particularly if they are actively seeking tourist or convention business, trying to attract new corporations to the area, and/or promoting the expansion of local business opportunities. The arts have etched their mark on the quality of life yardstick. Frequently the arts directly contribute to the economic product of specific neighborhoods or business districts within the city. The arts are viewed as positive attributes of city life, but how to sustain their existence while maintaining quality becomes the issue. What role could a metropolitan university play in this setting?

## The University

The arts at most universities have the ability to be one of the most visible assets that these institutions share with their communities. This has been true for decades and arts programming is frequently second only to athletic events in drawing the local population to campus. If a metropolitan university has arts programs with disciplines in art, dance, music, and theater, it usually provides at least one hundred arts events per year. With this level of productivity, the university often becomes the major producer of events in the community.

Frequently the arts facilities on campus provide one or more of the best local performance spaces and exhibition galleries. It is not uncommon for these facilities to be regularly used by community arts organizations for their events. It is acceptable practice for academic departments to assist local arts organizations by serving as co-sponsors of events in order for the non-campus groups to receive reduced costs when using the university facilities. This is the simplest of cooperative ventures. It is low risk to each participating group and builds goodwill.

In addition to producing arts events the university usually brings renowned guest artists to campus to perform and/or exhibit. These special events may fill cultural gaps in programming that no other organization can plug. Universities take on this role for numerous reasons many of which may be viewed as educational, but the enriching opportunities to the cultural life of the community should not be underestimated.

What is obvious about the quantity of cultural activities stemming from metropolitan universities and local arts organizations is that rarely is the university the "only arts act in town." In this situation universities are automatically thrust into a cooperative venture mode. Guest artists frequently provide wonderful opportunities for sharing. Activities such as open master classes, special lectures, joint workshops, etc., provide moments of goodwill and enriched artistic stimulation.

This type of outreach programming exists on most metropolitan campuses. What may be missing is the desire to have these activities build toward higher levels of cooperation. Another potential barrier standing in the way of cooperation is the view frequently held by local arts organizations that university arts programs are in direct competition. The reverse view is also possible. If these perceptions of vying for the same audience members, donors, grants, performance dates, and facilities exist, the environment could be fraught with hostility and/or suspicion. These factors need to be considered as organizations begin the courtship process leading to

collaborative undertakings.

## Steps Toward Partnering

Organizations consider partnering or collaboration most often in order to alleviate the stress of inadequate human and fiscal resources. Sometimes an alliance is driven by the desire to create an event of superior quality. Cooperation may be the only means of either achieving a specific goal or surviving. No matter which situation motivates the impulse to form a joint venture, it is important to move through several steps with patience and tolerance.

### *Step I: Getting Acquainted*

The major decision-makers of the interested organizations must meet and begin discussions relating to the specific project. The first meeting is a critical time to be clear about goals and limitations. Mutual understanding in the beginning helps to avert controversy later in the project. One collaboration I helped to instigate while dean of the College of Fine Arts at Wichita State University (WSU) provides a good example. Opera Kansas (OK) discovered that it desired to present the same opera touring company that was negotiating with the college. The first meeting between three of the OK board members and the college's director of opera plus the dean revealed that the ideal situation was co-sponsorship of one performance to be held at the university. When we sat down at the table, our initial ideas of when, where, and how were very different from our final understanding reached by the end of this first session. OK had reserved a 2,100 seat hall in the civic center. The college neither wanted to incur the expense of renting a large hall nor trying to fill it, when the facility on campus was adequate. Once this hurdle was cleared, the idea supporting a joint venture seemed reasonable. The discussion relating to financial commitment went smoothly since several aspects of the fiscal package were presented in the preceding debate. At the end of this session we had agreed to co-sponsor the event and determined when and where. The subsequent details relating to our roles as presenters were to be outlined at a second arranged meeting within two weeks.

Part of getting acquainted is also building trust. It is critical to attend to arrangements as planned and scheduled. When assignments are clearly made with reasonable deadlines, trust begins to build as people act responsibly. One way to ensure cooperation is not to rely on memory. It is important to assign someone the responsibility of writing a brief summary of actions taken and assignments designated.

The delineation of a shared goal or goals helps to establish a foundation for the present endeavor. Sometimes shared goals clearly indicate possibilities for future joint ventures. The idea of the WSU College of Fine Arts partnering with OK to present annually an opera touring company was one step away, if the first project was modestly successful. Both organizations wanted local citizens to have the opportunity of experiencing professional opera performances without having to travel a minimum of three hours by car or bus. An extra bonus for the audience was that the university wanted opera performances to be fiscally accessible to a diverse population. Presenting the program in a campus facility saved money. The desire of both organizations to secure underwriting to support the performance fee also helped to make this goal a reality.

### ***Step II: Working Together***

As the project moves ahead it is critical to establish quickly the structure by which identified persons carry out the agreed upon plan. Determining who does what and how is critical to a good working relationship. Sometimes the rationale for making specific assignments helps to build trust and understanding. If it is easier for university personnel to carry out a particular task, it helps to make that advantage understood before merely taking on the assignment.

Some advantages discovered while WSU and OK were engaged in the opera project provided new opportunities: targeted mailing lists were combined, the drudgery of preparing publicity mailings was shared, community volunteers were enlisted to assist with promoting the event, and our mutual interests and new friendships helped bond the opera community. Also the fact that two arts organizations were working jointly to secure publicity from newspapers, radio stations, and television channels seemed to result in expanded coverage.

During the period of working together on a project, it is important to monitor and evaluate the progress. It helps if meetings are short and timely, agendas are jointly created, and individuals are assigned to specific tasks they can readily perform.

### ***Step III: Post-mortem***

Following the completion of the project the process of assessing the final outcome of the endeavor is important. The shortcomings or disappointments should be objectively discussed as well as the successful elements. What could have worked more effectively and how to improve such an undertaking should be discussed before moving to the question of future collaborations. The OK/WSU project was viewed as a very successful event--the hall was sold-out, the audience members wanted to know what company we planned to bring in next year, and the collaborating organizations had achieved the desired goal. During our post-mortem session the positive sense of accomplishment quickly led to discussions about what company to engage for the following year. Our collaboration had not only prospered, but it now was ready to grow. In addition to the opera touring company venture, the two organizations developed other collaborative activities that evolved over the next several years; the college worked with OK on annually producing a children's opera for Christmas and an adult opera for the River Festival. Wichita, with a metropolitan population of about 400,000 currently has several live opera performance opportunities for diverse tastes and for all age levels.

## **Identities Preserved**

Since partnership or collaboration is not merger, it is essential to preserve the individuality of each partner and its separate identity. Other considerations also effect long term relationships. Successful joint ventures that have developed over a period of years or decades may evolve into collaborations that are not equally divided in terms of resources--human, fiscal, and/or physical spaces. Often a community arts organization will flourish because it is partially supported by its relationship with a metropolitan university. Each organization may gain slightly different advantages by working together.

WSU maintains a collaborative relationship with the Wichita Symphony

Orchestra (WSO), a regional orchestra. While this symbiotic relationship began when the orchestra was founded nearly fifty years ago, the nature of the collaboration has changed significantly. The orchestra has evolved into an independent organization. It is important for the orchestra to maintain its own identity. As a result the collaboration is not widely recognized in the general community. However this

*Table 1*

**WSU**

- Faculty maintain orchestral positions
- Professional orchestral opportunities exist for graduate students providing them with additional income
- Scholarship assistance is donated by WSO since it rehearses in a School of Music facility without rental fee
- Music faculty has high visibility in community
- Collaboration continues to build audiences for both organizations
- Patrons began to establish scholarships to support both college and symphony

**WSO**

- Principal or leader of each section is an excellent musician who is recruited to the community because the primary position is with the university
- Capable section players are recruited from the ranks of graduate students, faculty spouses, and alumni
- Use of university facilities without lease and rental fees
- Ability to have outreach activities in public schools performed by university student

collaboration contributes multiple benefits to both organizations.

This listing (Table 1) is not intended to exhaust the benefits, but illustrates some of the diverse advantages. To be equal partners is not the desire in the WSU/WSO relationship, but each participating organization is greatly enhanced by the arrangement.

### **Maintaining relationships**

Continuing relationships need to be maintained with the same dedication as a new alliance. Every partnership goes through several stages of development. If both organizations are perceived to be individually successful, the collaborative efforts require constant nurturing. The dependency of the relationship may become obscured from public view due to the independent stance exhibited by at least one of the two partners. How can this type of relationship continue to produce benefits for

both organizations? How can the relationship avoid being torn asunder? These critical concerns need to be explored.

Open channels for communication provide an invaluable key to maintaining a relationship between two organizations. It is frequently a good policy for the local arts organization to have either the dean of the college or another decision maker from the unit serve on its board of directors. This helps the university partner to have knowledge regarding the future directions of the community group. Personally I have never felt it was my role as a board member to raise any controversial issues at regular board meetings. Troublesome situations are discussed with the appropriate counterpart in private sessions in order to avoid major problems.

Also regularly scheduled informal sessions once a month afford the leadership of both groups the opportunity to exchange information privately. This type of session has proven to be particularly helpful if the partners share personnel. The primary employer can keep the secondary employer informed about personnel situations such as potential status changes and/or performance concerns. I had lunch regularly with the WSO maestro and/or the executive director. We were frequently able to solve dilemmas before they became problems. It is always easy to communicate by telephone if some situation cannot

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wait for the next lunch meeting. It is important not to spring surprises on the partner.

If personnel are shared, it is necessary for the primary employer to give the secondary a voice in the hiring process. WSU College of Fine Arts always includes the maestro or his designate in the decision. He attends the candidate's audition on campus and frequently the master lessons. His vote is critical since the college would not hire someone if the maestro is dissatisfied. The reverse works as well since the "symphony" would not hire an applicant that did not have the approval of the college's search committee.

There is also a clear understanding relating to graduate students who hold particular positions in the symphony. These students are eligible for the symphony positions as long as they hold graduate student status. If a student leaves the university, he or she no longer holds the position. This policy alleviates many problems and continues to be enforced.

Another significant key to maintaining a long-term relationship is to keep the collaborations evolving in a manner that works with the growing demands placed upon each organization and its personnel. The leadership of both organizations should be ever mindful of each others goals and visions. I will again draw on an example from the WSU/WSO relationship to illustrate the practical application. A patron of both the symphony and the university desired to support a string program for primary school children, Kinder Concerts. It was determined that members of the WSU graduate string quartet, who were also section players for WSO, would create a program each year that would tour to the seventy plus Wichita Public Schools. The audience would be the children in kindergarten, first, and second grades. The goal was to introduce these children to string music and to provide some basic understanding of the instruments. This goal fit the outreach missions of both organizations plus it made the public school system the receiving partner. There was no fiscal obligation on the part of the school district. The only requirement for each school was to cooperate with scheduling the performance and providing the space.

This project has been in place for approximately a decade and it is deemed successful. In the past several years it has been noted that more elementary students desire to play string instruments when they have the opportunity commencing in the third grade. There is also a greater number of children desiring to attend the WSO youth concerts.

Each partner holds some responsibility for the success of a project. It became evident that for the WSU/WSO Kinder Concerts one person had to be directly responsible for the graduate string quartet. When each partner had a representative that coached, helped create the program, and guided the activities of the quartet, it produced chaos. Since the quartet was primarily a university group, it was determined that a faculty member would serve as coach/manager and each organization could comment during the dress rehearsal phase. This arrangement worked to everyone's satisfaction. Obviously the adage "too many cooks spoil the broth" was true in this situation. No matter how many partners are involved in a cooperative venture, it is necessary for the primary responsibility to be clearly designated.

To keep improving the quality of WSO and the WSU graduate music program another venture evolved. New graduate student fellowships were developed through patron support. These opportunities attracted talented graduate students who were identified to hold second chair status in specified sections of WSO. This program is serving to enhance the quality of the talent for both partners.

The WSU/WSO examples also reveal that once a collaborative relationship is well established, its successes breed more opportunities for additional ventures. This adds new life to the partnership as well as to each participating organization. Other considerations figure in maintaining collaborative ventures. Shared success and mutual trust established over time are the foundation upon which new projects evolve. Also many aspects of a successful collaboration are built upon the integrity and personality of particular individuals.

As university people in management positions seem to have faster turnover these days than in previous decades, it is necessary to document significant agreements. Should a key person leave either the university or the arts organization, it is a good idea to appoint one person from the partner organization to the search committee. I was impressed when this was done by Wichita State University in 1986. It not only allowed the partner group to have a voice in selecting the dean, but it gave the candidates a sense of the importance placed upon the cooperative relationship. When WSO was searching for a new maestro, I had a special session with each candidate even though I was not a designated member of the search committee.

## **Benefits**

The benefits derived from establishing a collaborative relationship will vary from project to project as well as from partner to partner. But several typical benefits seem to emerge on a regular basis.

### *Collaboration . . .*

- provides new funding opportunities either from patrons, foundations, and/or agencies;
- creates opportunity to engage in an enterprise that would be beyond one organization's usual capabilities;
- pools resources--human, physical, and fiscal--to accomplish an

- important goal;
- demonstrates to the community the ability to work in harmony with other organizations;
  - helps audience development efforts;
  
  - provides invaluable service to the community by presenting enhanced program opportunities;
  - enhances quality of cultural life in the community beyond usual range and strengthens the cultural environment;
  - provides the university with a significant example of cooperative accomplishment in the community;
  - makes survival a possibility in difficult times;
  - enhances visibility of arts degree programs.

### **Critical Success Factors**

Collaboration or partnering allows metropolitan universities to be connected to the cultural organizations in their areas. These activities frequently underscore the outreach mission of the university by serving as the heartbeat of the community's cultural life without being the sole provider.

It is necessary to provide close attention to the critical factors that promote successful partnerships.

1. Have leaders who will share their time and vision to insure that the venture is completed.
2. Share goals and promote effective planning for each collaborative endeavor. Basic assumptions always need to be clarified in partnerships.
3. Maintain open channels of communication with the partner.
4. Create public awareness of partnership whenever feasible.
5. Avoid unnecessary confusion by having terms, assignments, actions, and agreements in writing.
6. Encourage assessment of projects and partnerships. This keeps projects on schedule and allows partners to respond to changing conditions.

Arts partnerships between metropolitan universities and local arts organizations are becoming more prevalent in this age of changing frameworks. They are a means for enhancing cultural options in a medium size metropolis and for bolstering arts organizations against economic pressures and other difficulties. This is the opportune time to see what possibilities exist in your community.