



*The Harlem Nutcracker*  
Photo: David Smith

# Rethinking Cultural Participation

A NEW STUDY DEFINES A FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE

*The basis of the Arts Partners program is audience participation. In this article, Michael Moore, program director of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, describes how a new study defines a framework within which organizations may design, implement and test successful strategies.*

**B**efore *The Harlem Nutcracker* opened at the Detroit Opera House in November 1998, many local residents had never ventured inside the grand and venerable structure to enjoy a performance. "It's not because they don't want to come," Oliver Ragsdale, president of the Arts League of Michigan, said. "It's because no one has formally extended an invitation that will reach them."

But when three Detroit-area organizations joined forces, the invitation was extended, and a noticeable and

welcome shift in arts participation began to occur. The presentation of Donald Byrd/The Group's ballet, *The Harlem Nutcracker*, combined the assets of the University Musical Society of Ann Arbor, the Arts League of Michigan and the Detroit Opera House in a shared commitment to increasing participation in the arts.

What is happening in these three organizations goes deeper than the presentation of outstanding work, or the audiences it has drawn. This is just one of many examples of cultural leaders from distinctly different organizations finding both common purpose and new ways of working and, in the process, creating greater and richer arts opportunities for people.

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BY MICHAEL MOORE

In Detroit and across the country, arts presenters know that participation matters and that it returns powerful benefits. Among the rewards are improved artistry, greater board and staff enthusiasm, enhanced community visibility, increased financial support and reinvigorated organizations with a vital sense of purpose.

Enhancing arts participation is also hard work. Resources are scarce and the risk of failure always present. Aspirations for greater participation must be deeply rooted in an organization, and decisions about goals and methods thoughtfully crafted. While arts organizations are skilled at devising creative ways to pursue audience engagement, choosing the right strategy for the right circumstances can be guesswork. What is needed is a framework within which to understand the

lessons of others and to design successful strategies for any circumstance.

A STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK FOR ARTS PARTICIPATION

What should a framework for increasing participation include? It begins with a different base of research. Traditionally, the arts have relied on information about economic status, education and other background factors to explain the motivations and attitudes of potential participants. Demographics may relate to participation, but they do not determine it. In other words, attempting to influence an individual's background characteristics won't work in attracting the public. A RAND study conducted for the Wallace-Reader's Digest Funds, to be released this summer, is helping us learn that people's decisions to participate involve a complex set of choices

Changes in Participation

Strategic Framework for Arts Participation

Types of Participants

	Creators	Audiences	Stewards	
<b>Broaden</b>	Increase the number of artist residencies, performances or exhibitions	Attract more of the same groups of people as currently served	Attract more of the same members, donors, trustees or volunteers as currently served	<b>Practical</b>
<b>Deepen</b>	Extended the length of artist residencies or commissions; provide higher quality support for artists	Increase frequency and variety of interactions with current audiences; enhance visitor/audience service	Increase the level of personal or financial contribution among those currently served; improve donor service	<b>Experiential</b>
<b>Diversify</b>	Change the type and variety of art forms presented; provide multi-disciplinary programs	Attract and serve different audience groups from those currently served	Attract the support of individuals from different target groups	<b>Perceptual</b>

Possible Barriers

es that are influenced by a much broader range of factors. Unlike demographics, however, these factors are open to influence through smart changes in business practice.

The RAND findings will help organizations develop a systematic understanding of how people participate, what it means to increase participa-

tion, and what barriers complicate participation-building efforts. Coupled with insights from the work of our grantees, the RAND findings have helped the Funds develop some language and definitions that can guide institutions in making more strategic decisions. We call the resulting model a Strategic Framework for Arts

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Participation.

The model organizes critical distinctions that lead an organization to choose what to do, for whom and how:

### 1. Modes of participation

People participate in the arts and the work of arts organizations as creators, audiences or stewards (board members, volunteers and investors). Every organization juggles competing expectations from all three groups, and these expectations shift and change over time. As a result, an arts organization first needs to think in targeted terms about those it is attempting to reach and then needs to craft different strategies to balance the divergent claims of each participant group. Understanding the needs and relationships of targeted groups to institutions is also critical to funders seeking to make good investments. For arts groups and funders alike, successfully building participation is not a one-size-fits-all enterprise. Strategies must be tailored to the organization's mission, artistic goals, institutional needs and resources, and community.

### 2. Changes in participation

Organizations must then decide how they want participation to change. The model describes three options.

- **Broadening** means striving to serve more of the same people as the existing participants. Broadening the participation of creators, for example, might mean increasing the number of artists involved in residencies, exhibitions or performances.

- **Deepening** means serving the same or fewer people, but in a more frequent or intense manner. Stewards might deepen their participation by devoting more volunteer hours to an organization or by contributing or generating more financial support.

- **Diversifying** means serving different people from those who currently participate. Frequently, organizations think of new audiences as those with whom they have had limited or no contact.

### 3. Barriers to participation

RAND's research helped us understand that broadening, deepening and diversifying participation have uniquely different challenges.

- If an organization has the goal of broadening participation, the likely barriers are practical—for example, space, advertising, marketing, hours or accessibility.

- If an organization wants to create a deeper connection, strategies tied to overcoming experiential barriers—connection to the artists and art forms or the organization's quality of service—are the common obstacles.

- Perceptual barriers are the most important factors to address when attempting to diversify participation. People must see a value in their relationship with an organization, from their own perspective, before they take the first step toward participation.

Distinguishing between different barriers to participation is critical to balancing resource allocations and the competing demands for service. For instance, lowering ticket prices (practical) and changing what is on the stage or in the gallery (experiential) will likely not solve the perceptual barriers that confront people different from those already being served. Attempting strategies that are misaligned may not just be a lost opportunity. It may, in fact, alienate existing artists, audiences or stakeholders.

Organizations are just beginning to explore the possibilities for the Strategic Framework for Arts Participation model. "What is particularly useful to us," said Richard Andrews, director of the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle, "is the clarification of the relationships between artistic mission and modes of participation."

Spirited strategic discussions in his organization, which is committed to presenting challenging, innovative work, led to the realization that deepening participation—instead of broadening or diversifying—is the best approach for now. By keeping its focus on its already committed audi-

ence—as opposed to "every breathing human in the entire Northwest"—the gallery could devote its valuable resources to achieving greater, more sustained success in reaching its participation goals.

#### APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK

How does the model apply to the three Detroit organizations that presented *The Harlem Nutcracker*? Despite pronounced differences in size, purpose and culture, the University Musical Society, the Arts League of Michigan and the Detroit Opera House discovered that their participation goals were complementary. What drew them together, said UMS president Kenneth C. Fischer, was their mutual determination to find new ways of working that "allow everyone to share both risks and rewards."

The University Musical Society (UMS) and the Detroit Opera House were seeking new audiences, so they both sought to diversify participation. UMS had a long tradition of presenting mostly classical western music in Ann Arbor. When they co-commissioned and first presented *The Harlem Nutcracker*, however, the horizons of both UMS and the Opera House expanded to include audiences they had never reached. Both had perceptual, practical and experiential obstacles to overcome. For example, the Opera House did not appear welcoming, and Ann Arbor—though less than an hour's drive from Detroit—was not perceived as accessible. UMS also saw the opportunity to deepen its presence with audiences, particularly with stewards. The production attracted corporate sponsorships and other support that would not have been available in Ann Arbor. The Opera House not only brought new audiences into its space, but it also developed more diverse and deeper relationships with community organizations, especially local artists like the Rudy Hawkins Singers, who performed onstage and in the theater lobby. For the Arts League of

Michigan, participation was affected in multiple ways. *The Harlem Nutcracker* collaboration was a vehicle for broadening participation by informing more people in its core constituency about its community program offerings. On another front, the Arts League made valuable connections with major arts institutions and funders, potentially diversifying the participation of audiences, creators and stewards alike.

#### AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

What qualities and practices are evident in arts organizations that are successful at increasing cultural participation? The RAND study suggests that an integrative approach is essential. Such an approach:

- links an organization's participation-building activities to its core values and purpose by choosing goals that support that purpose;
- identifies clear target groups and bases its tactics on good information about those groups;
- is based on a clear understanding of both the internal and external resources that can be committed to building participation; and
- establishes a process for feedback and self-evaluation.

Organizations that succeed at increasing cultural participation have another deceptively simple quality: the ability to listen. By listening to the people they engage—and would like to engage—organizations can devise targeted, relevant and workable strategies and tactics. Organizations that listen deeply, and with respect, are doing more than conventional planning. They know that engaging people requires a frank examination of perceptions and the active exchange of information. By challenging their traditional view of themselves and their communities, they have the potential to revitalize and intensify people's relationship to the arts.

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