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The cure for Boston's churning art sector

By Libbie Shufro and Joseph Levendusky | February 3, 2008

BOSTON IS experiencing a creative brain drain - a slow exodus of talent that is depriving our cultural scene of many potential bright lights.

A recent Boston Foundation report has taken note of this phenomenon, documenting signs of financial stress among small to midsize arts groups and also the presence of "churn" - considerable numbers of entries and exits - in the sector.

The foundation suggests that this may not be unhealthy, that a weeding out of the no-longer-relevant from the fresh and dynamic is desirable and healthy. It also suggests that struggling organizations might take control over their destiny and consider an exit strategy or merge with another organization.

The foundation has recognized a real problem - that there are not sufficient resources to support all enterprising arts groups - but "marketplace arbitration" is only part of the solution.

We - each of us with more than 20 years experience working with small to midsize arts organizations in Boston - have become well acquainted with "churn." But we have seen too many worthy organizations "churned" out along with the less noteworthy. While Boston does a good job of supporting its flagship institutions, like the Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Museum of Fine Arts, it does a lackluster job of supporting smaller arts organizations.

Boston is blessed with a rich vein of creative talent. The intellectual atmosphere created by its colleges and universities and a rich historic tradition combine to attract the sort of talented and inspired individual who starts an artistic enterprise. Again and again, we have watched exciting new organizations make exciting art that is well received and bodes promise for the future, only to falter for lack of support as they mature and grow.

This often occurs at an organizational "tipping point" - when operations grow beyond the ability of the artistic founders to manage them. Growth demands that they hire professional staff, such as a general manager and development staff, and take on infrastructure, such as office space and computer equipment. Production costs increase along with the sophistication of the work.

This is where Boston's "supportive environment for the arts" seems to fail promising arts organizations.

We propose a discussion regarding the best course of action to ensure a robust, supportive environment for a broad and diverse array of vital cultural institutions which should include:

- **Providing ongoing operational support and "bridge funding."**

A consortium of public and private groups should invest in a significant grant program to provide operational and bridge funding to innovative arts organizations that meet a "criteria for excellence." This program would engage in a more field-oriented "in-person" experience with smaller nonprofits rather than relying solely on traditional grant applications.

- **Investing in one or more umbrella organizations to support small to midsize arts groups.**

These organizations would provide affordable space, shared infrastructure, and professional staff. This arrangement, as opposed to mergers, would provide economies of scale, while allowing individual organizations to retain their missions and voices.

- **Increasing public and private funding for the arts.**

State support of the arts has declined sharply in real dollar terms since the late 1980s, even as the economic impact of the cultural sector has grown. Other US cities have been more proactive in recognizing arts organizations as cultural assets and funding them.

According to a 2003 Boston Foundation report, "San Francisco, St. Paul, Seattle, and Pittsburgh all have some type of dedicated cultural revenue tax." Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., have cultural associations that advocate for increased private and public funding, and promote culture through umbrella marketing campaigns. While the Massachusetts Advocates for Arts, Sciences, and Humanities has had significant success on the state level, more needs to be done on a city level.

Also in 2003, the Boston Foundation stated in its "Boston Indicators Project" that "sustained support for the arts and

culture activities is critical to maintaining the region's cultural vitality, its brand as a center for creativity and innovation, and its competitive edge as a region that can attract and retain creative class workers." Our forebears were forward thinking and left us the BSO, the public library, and the MFA. We too must look into the future and invest in what we wish to leave as our cultural legacy. The future vitality of Boston and our competitive edge as a creative, world-class city depends on it.

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