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How Creative Collaboration Can Help Nonprofits Survive And Thrive



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We recently partnered with the DeVos Institute of Arts Management on a research project examining the state of the arts community in the Portland-Vancouver metro area. Our goal behind this project was to better understand the current opportunities and challenges facing arts nonprofits as well as identify strategies to help cultivate sustainable growth within the community based on similarly sized municipalities.

While the report shed light on a variety of topics specific to the arts sector in a single region, it also underscored and crystalized one strategy that can be of particular use to small and midsize nonprofits as we begin to plan for 2021 and navigate the coming challenges of the next several years resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

Creative Collaboration

One sign of long-term sustainability and success within a sector is a healthy distribution or ecosystem of organizations along the spectrum of size. The Portland area for example is home to a wide variety of arts organizations, but those groups can almost entirely be defined as either large anchor institutions or small startup groups serving niche audiences. There are very few midsize organizations. The initial reaction to the current spread in an area like Portland can be either to invest heavily in a number of small organizations to help them transition to the midsize level or identify groups with a similar focus to merge, creating a single, larger group.

These ideas are valid yet may not be as successful as some would hope. Increasing the financial footing of a nonprofit to facilitate substantial growth takes time and should be done thoughtfully to ensure sustainability. Identifying groups with adequately similar focuses and values for a merger can be just as difficult, and that's before we consider the challenge of asking passionate founders to step away from their personal investment in order to facilitate a joint venture.

There is, however, a third option. Nonprofits can reap the benefits associated with a much larger organization by thoughtfully *collaborating* with other, similarly sized organizations. In fact, many organizations may find success in navigating the coming challenges related to the pandemic by introducing innovative collaborative strategies. Here are a few examples of how collaboration between nonprofits can help promote sustainability and see groups flourish in the long term.

Share space. Identify ways to engage your audience while being flexible in your space requirements with other groups. Rather than shoulder sole responsibility for monthly rent, can you secure a joint workspace with groups that either work on similar issues or share your values?

Share talent. Your organization may not be able to afford a dedicated bookkeeper or marketing consultant, but could you partner with one or two similar organizations to jointly engage a new staff member to serve a common need?

Conduct joint events. Collaborative events can help you connect to a broad audience at a lower investment, either by combining your budgets to produce a larger event that will draw a more substantial crowd or collaborating on the topic and structure of a gathering to generate interest from the target audiences of multiple groups.

Promote each other. Identify groups working in a similar space or speaking to similar values and discuss ways you can help promote each other's work to your own audience. By helping raise awareness of your respective projects, you increase your opportunity to connect with a broader audience.

The nonprofit sector is a vast ecosystem. While our focus may be on our own efforts, an ecosystem and its components only thrive when they engage with one another in productive ways. Right now, our ecosystem faces an unprecedented collection of challenges. In order to successfully navigate the coming months and transition to a period of flourishing, we must work together in innovative and sustainable ways.