



Enabling Bold Change

Reflections from the eight-year ArtsAmplified Initiative

Authored by Sarah Lee Consulting

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Foreword

When the ArtsAmplified Initiative began to take shape in 2017, no one anticipated the challenges to come – or how important aspects of this collaboration would prove to be for a group of 15 leading Massachusetts arts organizations or for their funder.

At that time, the arts sector was already dealing with a period of disruption and change, grappling with fundamental questions about relevance and impact – how to make the case for the arts in terms of civic engagement, social cohesion, and economic development. Questions about who gets funded, who gets seen, and who leads were front and center, while emerging funding models were incentivizing new thinking about the role of arts and its integration across sectors.

The City of Boston had recently released its first-ever cultural plan, which called for greater neighborhood access to the arts, stronger support for artists and small organizations, and more inclusive investments. Yet significant challenges remained: insufficient funding, limited pathways for artists, a lack of civic engagement, and minimal investment in diverse and emerging communities and artforms. Many organizations were ready to take risks but lacked the capital and encouragement to do so.

At the Barr Foundation, our Arts + Creativity Program was just starting to expand its focus beyond Boston, embracing a statewide approach to help advance a more resourced, equitable arts ecosystem across the Commonwealth. ArtsAmplified emerged as a first major part in our new strategy: a long-term investment in the capacity of arts organizations to lead adaptively, work in deeper relationship with their communities, and experiment in service of meaningful change.

We began by inviting a cohort of 15 organizations already known for their artistic excellence, willingness to question norms, and future-focused approaches. Each partner was at an important inflection point in its lifecycle, pivoting to better align approaches and resources with their intent to generate greater impact. Together, we embarked on an multiyear investigation into arts leadership, grounded in co-design, exploration, and experimentation.

With bold ambitions and plates already full, none of us anticipated how much more change the next eight years would bring. The COVID-19 pandemic, a national reckoning with racial injustice, and ongoing threats to equity and inclusion in the arts have tested this sector in profound ways. Through it all, ArtsAmplified partners showed what is possible when flexible support, mutual trust, and shared learning are in place. They reimagined their roles in civic life, embraced risk in pursuit of equity, and demonstrated the power of aligning organizational strategy with community needs.

It has been an honor to walk alongside these leaders, and we are immensely proud of their courage and the transformative work they have led within their organizations and communities. This summative reflection offers a window into that journey. We hope it contributes to ongoing conversations about how to support bold leadership in the arts.

As the sector continues to face new challenges, it also carries vast potential to create solutions that bring about a better future for everyone. That future calls for our best thinking and action in service of our missions, requiring ever more of the elements that support lasting impact: collaborating, ideating, investing, testing, learning, and adapting.

We invite you to review, reflect, and build on these learnings as we continue this vital work together.

Onward,



San San Wong

Senior Advisor, Arts + Creativity Program

Executive Summary

In 2017, the Barr Foundation's Arts & Creativity Team invited 15 Massachusetts arts organizations into ArtsAmplified, an initiative designed to support them in leading meaningful, yet challenging, organizational change to deepen community impact. Barr focused on "known quantity" organizations: established organizations with a defined business model, strong leaders, a proclivity for reinvention and risk-taking, and both the willingness and ability to engage in strategic dialogue around change in a changing world. Many had already been exploring essential questions about relevance amid changing demographics and expectations, fresh ways to engage community, and how to experiment while maintaining organizational stability.

ArtsAmplified provided a flexible container in which these organizations could build the capacities they believed were necessary to pursue their ambitious change goals. Initiative supports were co-designed with grantee partners, evolving throughout the years as deemed necessary. As ArtsAmplified draws to a close, the Barr Foundation commissioned this summative reflection to capture the story of the initiative's eight-year arc.

Initiative Participants

The American Repertory Theater
ArtsEmerson
Celebrity Series of Boston
Global Arts Live
The Greenway Conservancy
GrubStreet
The Huntington

The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston
The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum
Jacob's Pillow
MASS MoCA

Peabody Essex Museum
Silkroad
The Theater Offensive
The Yard

ArtsAmplified: key features

Over \$35.5 million invested in 15 arts organizations over eight years

Two cycles of three-year unrestricted grants + targeted funding for special projects, bold organizational change, and collaborations

Coaching, technical assistance, and cohort gatherings



Photo courtesy Mass MoCA

Bold change journeys

The central goal of this reflection process was to document the change journeys that the 15 ArtsAmplified partners embarked on during the initiative and to explore the conditions — both within and beyond ArtsAmplified — that enabled change. While many ArtsAmplified partner organizations are programming differently now than at the start of the initiative, they described the locus of change in terms of their processes for curating, interpreting, producing, and presenting artistic work; and in the values, systems, and relationships that guide their organizational culture. This suggests they believe **delivering cultural experiences that will resonate with an increasingly diverse population depends not only on what the art is, but how the organization operates.**

Eight dimensions of change

ArtsAmplified partners described their evolution along eight dimensions:

- 1. Deepening and expanding community engagement.** Thirteen ArtsAmplified partners described adopting a range of strategies to center community member voices, interests, and needs in the design, development, and execution of artistic programming — from doing more work in partnership with community-based organizations to inviting community members into curatorial practices, artistic planning, and program design.
- 2. Embedding commitments to civic and social impact.** Nine partners described undertaking change to clarify, institutionalize, and activate commitments to civic and social impact — including leveraging the arts and their influence in service to the public good by inviting audiences to engage in civic action; amplifying traditionally marginalized stories; and leveraging their own resources to respond to community needs.
- 3. Changing staffing structures and personnel.** Nine partners underwent substantial changes to staffing during the period of ArtsAmplified. Often these changes were made to accelerate efforts to deepen community engagement and activate civic impact.
- 4. Undertaking major capital projects.** Seven partners described initiating, advancing, or completing major capital projects during ArtsAmplified, including redeveloping existing performance or exhibition spaces and building entirely new spaces, to activate community engagement and civic leadership.
- 5. Transforming internal organizational culture.** Six partners described reshaping their internal organizational culture, particularly in the context of opening up institutional decision-making processes to include more staff and artist participation.
- 6. Investing in programmatic experimentation and innovation.** Five partners described programming changes in pursuit of bolder, more ambitious artistic work, as well as innovations in the ways audiences experience the work.
- 7. Strengthening capacity for long-term, strategic decision-making.** Four partners described enhancing their decision-making capacity during this period, developing a much stronger sense of alignment across their staff and boards around a shared strategic vision.
- 8. Stabilizing financial position.** Three partners described changes focused on financial stability, such as establishing an endowment or solidifying their working capital base.

“Programmatically, the organization is similar. Everything else about it is different.”

ArtsAmplified partner

Influential factors

The ArtsAmplified partners' change journeys over this period cannot be divorced from the COVID-19 pandemic, nor the racial justice uprising catalyzed by George Floyd's murder in May 2020. While the shutdowns forced by the pandemic substantially disrupted organizations' work, they also offered an opportunity to pause, reflect, and engage in transformational internal culture work and more focused community relationship building. Likewise, the intense dialogue about racial justice demanded that organizations get even clearer on their vision and values. These and other factors influenced the change ArtsAmplified partners achieved:

- **Staff turnover.** Like organizations nationwide during this period, ArtsAmplified partners experienced significant leadership succession and staff turnover, which often made the work more challenging but also created an opportunity to onboard staff with a natural proclivity to work in community-engaged, civic-minded ways.
- **Institutional values.** Several ArtsAmplified partners pointed to the importance of articulating and socializing institutional values to effectively make change. This was particularly salient for organizations attempting to share authority with community, advance internal culture change, and activate civic commitments.
- **Fundraising capacity.** Some ArtsAmplified partners added development staff and enhanced their fundraising infrastructure, viewing these investments as essential to supporting community-centered, civic-minded work that prioritizes impact over transactional relationships with audiences.
- **Board engagement.** Many ArtsAmplified partners emphasized the importance of having an engaged, committed board throughout their change journeys. Not only were boards a source of financial support, but they also co-led change with staff leadership and encouraged bold, strategic thinking.
- **Change management.** Most ArtsAmplified partners relied on a range of change management skills, mindsets, and perspectives throughout their change journeys. Some emphasized the importance of making space for mistakes, productive failure, and iteration. Others highlighted the courage it takes to let go of programming that no longer serves a new direction.

Of course, the initiative itself supported partner organizations over its eight-year arc. ArtsAmplified cohort gatherings provided community with other arts practitioners and served as an important forum to share perspectives, ideas, and information that strengthened each organization's work. The spirit of partnership and trust created by the Barr Foundation — and underscored by robust consultant thought partnership throughout — created space for iteration and the freedom for each organization to chart its own course with rigorous support. The initiative duration gave organizations a long runway to advance real change, while the unique combination of unrestricted grants plus supplemental funding and risk capital enabled organizations to try new things while sustaining core work.



Photo by Melissa Henry, courtesy The Greenway Conservancy

Lessons and considerations for arts funders

Grantmakers can:

- **Invest in organizations already committed to organizational change.** In ArtsAmplified, the Barr Foundation focused on “known quantity” organizations that were ready to undertake change. By selecting those with existing eagerness to invest in change, Barr could focus on supporting their self-determined journeys rather than incentivizing them to make change or guiding them toward a particular destination.
- **Give grantees a long runway with multiyear funding commitments.** ArtsAmplified partners appreciated the security of long-term support, which enabled them to take on bigger organizational challenges and make longer-term commitments to artists, communities, and other partners. The multiyear commitments gave organizations the confidence to tackle substantial change with the potential to transform who they are, how they operate, and the nature of their civic footprint.
- **Create space for organizations to build community with each other.** Despite some critiques of initial collective learning aims, all ArtsAmplified grantees cited the cohort component as a meaningful, cherished part of their experience with the initiative. Gatherings with other organizations provided essential opportunities for peer mentorship, insight sharing, and solidarity building, while also sparking new programmatic partnerships. For new leaders and staff, having access to a structured community for peer support accelerated their ability to put their own organization’s challenges and opportunities in a broader context.
- **Pair unrestricted operating support with risk capital to help organizations navigate dual imperatives.** Like many nonprofit organizations, ArtsAmplified partners needed to operate on two time horizons at once: keeping their current work going and adequately resourced in the near-term, while also evolving their work toward a longer-term vision. Unrestricted operating support provided essential stability and freed up brain space to think about the long term. Risk capital empowered organizations to make bolder moves in the long term without worrying that they’re sacrificing short-term security in the meantime.
- **Be explicit about the purpose of an initiative’s conceptual framework.** ArtsAmplified included a framework encouraging participants to explore artistic excellence, relevance, risk-taking, and civic leadership. This provided a valuable structure for thinking about their change goals, without limiting the scope of what they could take on. In the early years of the initiative, however, some partners viewed the framework as Barr’s prescriptive vision for what they should be trying to achieve. They needed to hear more directly that the framework was intended simply as a tool to shape dialogue and discovery.
- **Consistently communicate future funding plans beyond the initiative end date.** Despite any funder’s best intentions, it’s natural for grantees to grow concerned about the end of an initiative that has provided them with critical funding for many years — and the ArtsAmplified experience was no exception to this norm. It is simply not possible to overcommunicate with grantees about what they can reasonably expect from the funder when the current initiative expires.
- **Consider engaging intermediaries as thought partners.** Challenging power dynamics can show up even when a funder is consciously working to counter them. With this in mind, the Barr Foundation engaged consultants from TDC as critical stewards of the work: conducting coaching calls with ArtsAmplified partners, guiding them in the development of theories of change for their work, and offering feedback on supplemental funding requests. In this capacity, intermediaries provide grantees a trusted thought partner with whom they can share first-draft thinking.

Intermediaries, consultants, and grantmakers can:

- **Lead with humanity.** ArtsAmplified organizations praised the compassionate, humane approach that Barr Foundation staff and consultants took throughout the initiative, citing it as essential for building true, honest partnerships. Building relationships with multiple staff members at each organization, learning who they are as people, engaging with the consequences of change for individuals and the organization, and demonstrating that they were rooting for success (not looking for an opportunity to withhold support) all conveyed the deep humanity of the initiative.
- **Let co-design process flow from purpose.** Co-design can help ensure that an initiative genuinely responds to grantees' needs and goals, but it can also require significant grantee time and energy. It's important that the process generates the benefits of co-design without unduly taxing grantees. For ArtsAmplified, the Barr Foundation opted to gather input on an organization-by-organization basis — which ensured that the initiative and its activities were designed to address the full range of individual grantee needs, while putting most of the time and decision-making burden on the foundation and its consultant partners. But the initiative could have gone down another road, leaning into the potential of its cohort to become a platform for identifying shared goals and a space for developing plans for collective action on a shared agenda for fieldwide change. This would have demanded a much more time-intensive and collective co-design process, in which grantees listened to each other's needs and goals, negotiated shared priorities, and designed structures and activities to advance them. It also would have required an initial investment in building relationships and social capital within the group, so that they saw themselves as a community with a shared identity early on. This more robust approach wasn't right for ArtsAmplified, but it remains worth considering for funders that want an initiative to serve as an effective container for a community of practice, peer learning, and/or collective action.
- **Enable organizations to set their own goals while providing meaningful support to facilitate progress.** ArtsAmplified combined elements of both strategic and trust-based philanthropy paradigms: It was grounded in a clear vision and focused on organizations whose own goals aligned with that vision. It also created ample space — through flexible support and an explicit understanding that plans may change — for the foundation and grantee partners to shape the vision together.



Photo by Danita Jo, courtesy The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston

Introduction

By 2017, the idea that “the only constant is change” had become a cliché for Massachusetts arts organizations. Over the prior decade, they’d weathered the Great Recession of 2008 and its dramatic reshaping of the funding and revenue-generation landscape for the arts. They were navigating huge shifts in the racial diversity and age profile of the population and contending with equally huge shifts in technology’s influence on everything from how we access cultural programming to how we communicate and socialize with each other. For Boston arts organizations, the City’s approach to arts policy was also in flux. Three years prior, Boston inaugurated its first new mayor in 20 years, who appointed the first cabinet-level arts and culture chief in decades. The Mayor’s Office led an expansive cultural planning process, culminating in the 2016 “Boston Creates” plan, which centered neighborhood-based cultural strategies that were meant, in part, to address Boston’s legacy of racial segregation¹ — but which left some larger cultural organizations feeling that they’d been deprioritized by the City. And for all Massachusetts arts organizations, there was a hint that even more change was on the horizon: Donald Trump had recently been inaugurated as the nation’s 45th president after an incredibly close and contentious election that threatened to unleash a new era of social division in the country — especially around race and national origin — and which presaged the nationwide racial justice uprising and its backlash that would come in 2020. That we were only a few years away from a once-in-a-century global pandemic was unimaginable.



Photo by Gretchen Ertl, courtesy The Huntington

At this critical moment, the initiative that would become ArtsAmplified was taking shape at the Barr Foundation. The Foundation’s Arts & Creativity Team had begun to imagine their next key funding initiative. Ideally, it would build on the Barr-Klarman Arts Capacity-Building Initiative, which launched in 2012 in partnership with The Klarman Family Foundation. Barr-Klarman was premised on the belief that arts organizations need to be well capitalized if they are to embrace artistic risk and effectively experiment with new ways of working in the context of an uncertain and changing world. The initiative provided organizations with five years of unrestricted support, accompanied by a cohort-based learning curriculum to build their understanding of effective capitalization strategies and to strengthen capacity related to cultural competency and audience diversification, all in service of taking greater artistic risk.

Through Barr-Klarman, the Barr Arts & Creativity Team began to home in on a few key questions that they wanted to explore further through their next big initiative: How can arts organizations maintain relevance with a population that is rapidly diversifying, both demographically and with respect to cultural and technological tastes and preferences? How can they nurture bold, contemporary, rigorous artistic practices and expand their thinking about which creative voices are worthy of investment? How can they surmount the many obstacles to experimentation and risk-taking in their way — especially the financial imperative to maintain stability and avoid rocking the boat? And how can arts organizations be active conveners of and participants in civic and community dialogue about the shared future we want to live in?

¹ Boston had become a “majority minority” city at the beginning of the 21st century.

The Barr Arts & Creativity Team was drawn to the idea of partnering with arts organizations that were actively exploring similar questions through their own work while adeptly navigating external change. They identified a select group of large- and mid-sized Massachusetts arts organizations² (all of which had a prior funding relationship with Barr, including seven that were part of the Barr-Klarman Arts Capacity-Building Initiative cohort) that they considered to be both fellow travelers and exemplars: nationally or internationally recognized for being artistically current and rigorous, leaders within the local civic arena, programmatically and operationally daring, and financially sound. And they began to imagine how Barr could help these organizations activate bold organizational change.

With their consultant partners at TDC, the Barr team invited the leaders of these 15 organizations into conversations about relevance, artistic excellence, risk, and adaptive capacity. In these conversations, organizations emphasized to the Barr and TDC teams that pursuing bold, excellent, relevant work is hard. It's not just about having a vision for the work, it's about aligning staff, board, and resources — and continuing to do so on an ongoing basis. It's about pursuing change, while also responding to a changing world and trying not to break existing business and operational models. It's about challenging orthodoxies and walking courageously into the unknown, the untried, and the unfamiliar.

The Foundation came to believe that these organizations could be enabled, through a mix of financial resources and other supports, to take even bolder risks — including risks that involved pushing on the definition of contemporary artistic excellence in a rapidly diversifying world — in order to actualize change.

The design of ArtsAmplified

At its most foundational level, ArtsAmplified was conceived as a vehicle for enhancing the capacity of Massachusetts arts organizations to embrace risk-taking in service of bold organizational change. Unlike capacity-building initiatives that center the funder's beliefs about how organizations need to change, ArtsAmplified aimed to provide a flexible container in which organizations could pursue their own change goals and build the capacities they believed were necessary to do so. Understanding that meaningful change takes time, Barr outlined a six-year initiative that would include a backbone of unrestricted grants, augmented with additional episodic funding opportunities and coaching support. Barr also saw latent potential in treating participating organizations as a community of practice — a forum for peer learning and, potentially, a community working together to advance collective change in the Massachusetts arts landscape — and so a cohort component was included.



Photo courtesy GrubStreet

The Foundation came to believe that these organizations could be enabled, through a mix of financial resources and other supports, to take even bolder risks — including risks that involved pushing on the definition of contemporary artistic excellence in a rapidly diversifying world — in order to actualize change.

²In 2017, the Barr Foundation was expanding the geographic scope of its grantmaking from Boston to Massachusetts.

ArtsAmplified officially launched in 2018, with a round of three-year unrestricted grants to 15 arts organizations and an invitation to those organizations to play a substantial role in co-designing the rest of the initiative — the additional funding opportunities, the coaching support, the cohort activities — in partnership with Barr. The organizations were diverse in size, discipline, and geography. At launch, their operating budgets ranged in size from about \$1.2 million to \$30 million. They included four theater organizations, four museums, two dance organizations, two multidisciplinary presenters, one music organization, one literary arts organization, and one public art program within a public park. Twelve are based in Greater Boston, two in the Berkshires, and one on Martha's Vineyard.

Barr's partners at TDC spearheaded the process of building out ArtsAmplified in partnership with grantee organizations. They also engaged a developmental evaluation team, Vanessa Whang and collaborators, to serve as additional thought partners in shaping the initiative's design through ongoing inquiry and dialogue with grantees. Through a process of co-design, ArtsAmplified evolved considerably over its first couple of years. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, ArtsAmplified's design and approach shifted even more substantially. Broadly speaking, however, ArtsAmplified has consistently included four key components:

An initiative-level framework. At a conceptual level, ArtsAmplified was framed as an investigation into the intersections between four concepts: artistic excellence, relevance, risk-taking, and civic leadership. The focus on these concepts emerged organically out of Barr Arts & Creativity program staff's observations of strengths and limitations in the Massachusetts arts ecosystem; they were then reinforced in pre-launch interviews with the leaders of ArtsAmplified organizations conducted by TDC in 2017. These four concepts served as both a framework for organizing each partner's individual change goals and a potential framework for the cohort's learning agenda. However, the fact that there were very different perspectives on the definitions of each term across the cohort challenged the development of a shared learning agenda. In 2019, the initiative's original developmental evaluators drafted a Theory of Arts Leadership to further explore the four concepts. The theory presented the hypothesis that the leadership capacity of arts organizations is strengthened, in part, by deepening knowledge and practice of artistic excellence, relevance, risk-taking, and civic leadership. Since the pandemic, however, this framework moved somewhat to the periphery of the initiative to honor organizations' pursuit of their own conceptions of arts leadership. The framework remains a loose way of organizing the kind of work that the ArtsAmplified partners have pursued, especially through their Leadership Risk Capital grants (see below), and an occasional prod to encourage grantees to think differently about their work.

At a conceptual level, ArtsAmplified was framed as an investigation into the intersections between four concepts: artistic excellence, relevance, risk-taking, and civic leadership.

Funding. The backbone of ArtsAmplified was multiyear unrestricted funding. Each grantee partner received an initial three-year unrestricted grant, which was renewed for a second three-year cycle for all partners. As a result of co-design with the partners, Barr made three additional funding opportunities available. In 2019, all ArtsAmplified partners were invited to request supplemental funding of up to \$150,000 to support one or more projects that would advance their individual theories of change (see coaching and technical assistance support bullet below). Projects supported through supplemental funding requests included market research, programmatic pilots, customer relationship management (CRM) platforms, and visioning work.³ In 2022, all partners were invited to request Leadership Risk Capital grants of up to \$320,000 over two years to invest in transformational leadership-focused organizational change work in the context of pandemic recovery. These grants supported efforts such as organizational planning work, explorations of new leadership and power-sharing models, and work to advance organizational equity and inclusion. In 2024, the partners were invited to apply for a second two-year Leadership Risk Capital grant, which also extended the initiative timeline from six years to eight. Finally, in 2024, partners were invited to apply for Collaboration Fund grants: 18-month grants to support a collaborative effort between at least two ArtsAmplified partners to advance systemic change addressing shared sector challenges. Four pairs of partners were awarded Collaboration Fund grants for their

³Some of these awards were converted to general operating support in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic.

joint projects. Across all of the ArtsAmplified funding opportunities, the Barr Foundation has invested over \$35.5 million in its 15 ArtsAmplified partners.

Cohort gatherings. The Barr Arts & Creativity Team recognized that the 15 organizations they'd selected for ArtsAmplified were helmed by a dynamic and experienced group of Massachusetts arts leaders who were exploring similar questions within their respective organizations — but who didn't have many opportunities to be in conversation with each other. Barr hoped that the initiative could become a backdrop for regular gatherings among ArtsAmplified leaders, during which these leaders would engage in discourse about the ArtsAmplified framework and its application to the aspirations and challenges they held in common. The first major initiative gathering was a full-cohort convening, held in the fall of 2018 and envisioned as the first in a series of required bi-annual convenings. This inaugural convening was centered around the ArtsAmplified framework, but it also surfaced some challenging power dynamics and ideological differences within the cohort — which raised questions about the purpose of collective investigation of the framework. As a result, the spring 2019 convening was canceled and Barr, instead, continued to engage grantees to refine the purpose of gathering as a cohort. Through these conversations, they settled on the idea of an annual full-cohort convening and began to experiment with less structured executive dinners. A second full-cohort convening was held in the fall of 2019; it focused primarily on civic leadership which, among the four concepts in the ArtsAmplified framework, was the one that seemed most fertile for group exploration. When the pandemic began, the 2020 convening transitioned into a virtual gathering of ArtsAmplified executives to discuss their COVID response plans. From then on, ArtsAmplified gatherings became a valuable forum for leaders and other staff to discuss the myriad new operating challenges that the pandemic — and the adjacent racial justice uprising — created for arts organizations and to engage in problem-solving with a community of peers. Alongside informal social gatherings, Barr continued to convene the cohort to engage in targeted discussion of specific, timely topics, including COVID reopening strategies, undertaking systemic antiracism work within the arts, and changes in the federal funding environment after the 2024 election.



Photo by Danita Jo, courtesy The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston

Coaching and technical assistance support. At the outset of the initiative, Barr engaged consultants to work with grantees to co-design an ArtsAmplified learning agenda that would guide the development of opportunities to build staff and board capacity. Initially, the “curriculum” centered on the four concepts in the ArtsAmplified framework and outlined a mix of small-group learning workshops and organization-specific learning activities to deliver that curriculum. The full-cohort convenings described above were also seen as opportunities to advance a shared learning agenda. However, in the aftermath of the 2018 fall convening, cohort members began to question the purpose of collective learning. The initiative responded by reducing its emphasis on group-oriented learning, to focus on customized, organization-specific learning. This built on a robust layer of customized consultant and technical assistance support, intended to help partner organizations advance their individual goals, that was present from the initiative's launch. From the outset, each organization was assigned a coach from TDC — either Ashley Berendt or Susan Nelson — with whom they worked to clarify what they wanted to achieve during the grant period and to develop a theory of change that articulated assumptions underlying their work and named specific intended outputs and outcomes. Grantees met regularly with their TDC coaches throughout the initiative to update their theories of change in response to new learning and on-the-ground realities, to get support as they developed requests for supplemental and Leadership Risk Capital funding, and to receive guidance on how to effectively leverage ArtsAmplified resources to advance their

organizational learning goals. As the learning agenda was responsively co-designed with grantees over time, the slate of coaching and technical assistance supports offered was both expanded and refined. At various times, it included: coaching from Prescott & Associates on how to commission or conduct market research or audience data analysis as part of their work; coaching from National Arts Strategies for rising leaders; COVID response coaching with TDC; and other specific opportunities. In the later years of the initiative, coaching calls with TDC became an optional offering that could be requested by ArtsAmplified partners, rather than an expectation of the grant.

About this evaluation

The Barr Foundation commissioned this summative reflection process to capture the story of ArtsAmplified's eight-year arc — with a particular focus on documenting the change journeys of the 15 ArtsAmplified partners between 2017 and late 2024/early 2025 and their experiences of the initiative. It was not designed as a traditional evaluation but rather as an exploration, from the perspectives of leaders and other key staff at partner organizations, of the following three questions:

- How did the ArtsAmplified partner organizations change over the course of the initiative?
- What supported or hindered the partner organizations in achieving change?
- What role did ArtsAmplified play in partner organizations' change journeys?

Broadly speaking, the goal was to make meaning from organizations' experiences in and of ArtsAmplified in order to shed light on philanthropic practices that may be relevant to other grantmakers supporting change work.

To investigate these questions, the reflection process centered on in-depth interviews with current and former staff members of each of the 15 ArtsAmplified grantee partners. One group interview was conducted with current staff at each organization via Zoom; interviews lasted roughly 75 minutes. Each organization was encouraged to include its core leadership team in the conversation, as well as other team members who participated in key ArtsAmplified activities. The groups that participated ranged in size from two to eight people. In total, 63 people participated in group interviews. Eleven one-on-one interviews were also conducted with former senior staff members representing nine ArtsAmplified grantee partners. These interviews were handled via Zoom or phone, at the interviewee's discretion, and each lasted roughly 45 minutes. A complete list of interview participants is included in the appendix. All interviews were conducted in December 2024 and January 2025.

Broadly speaking, the goal was to make meaning from organizations' experiences in and of ArtsAmplified in order to shed light on philanthropic practices that may be relevant to other grantmakers supporting change work.

All interviews used an open-ended, conversational approach to cover topics outlined in an interview guide developed with input from Barr Foundation and TDC stakeholders. Key topics included: the primary dimensions along which the organization changed since 2017; decisions, moments, or other factors that made change possible; challenges encountered over the time period; distinctive and valuable features of ArtsAmplified; how ArtsAmplified supported change and how it could have better supported change; and advice for other grantmakers. The interviews were not designed to assess ArtsAmplified's influence on the broader arts and culture landscape of Massachusetts, nor whether individual grantees achieved their grant goals.

Upon completing all interviews, transcripts were generated by Otter.ai and analyzed by the author to identify common themes and response patterns.⁴ Themes were inductively identified regarding dimensions of organizational change and valuable features/characteristics of ArtsAmplified as a funding initiative. The number of organizations providing responses aligned with each theme was tabulated. Please note that these tabulations indicate only whether an organization’s current or former staff articulated a response during the interviews; they do not reflect an independent assessment of whether organizations objectively changed along each dimension. Selected quotes from interview transcripts are featured throughout this report; quotes have been lightly edited for clarity and readability.

While the findings that follow are primarily drawn from the interviews, this report was also informed by a review of the documentary record of ArtsAmplified, including internal strategic documents, funding requests for proposal, grant proposals and reports, a 2019 evaluation report conducted by Vanessa Whang and team, and other internal documents provided by the Barr Foundation and TDC for review.



Photo by Maria Moleni, courtesy The Greenway Conservancy



Photo by Kathy Tarantola, courtesy Peabody Essex Museum

⁴Otter.ai’s internal “summary” tool was not used to identify interview themes or takeaways.

Detailed Evaluation Findings

How did ArtsAmplified partners change?

The first goal of this reflection process was to document the dimensions along which the 15 ArtsAmplified partners endeavored to change during the initiative. Not only do their change journeys provide essential context for understanding ArtsAmplified's value, they also lend insight into the ambitions and aspirations of large- and mid-sized organizations in the broader arts and culture field over this dynamic period of time.

Across the interviews, ArtsAmplified partner organizations described **eight different dimensions along which their organizations have evolved** since the initiative launched in 2017–18, represented in the box below. The magnitude of these changes varied across the 15 partner organizations. A couple described their overall change arc during this period in modest, incremental terms: They deepened and expanded on existing strengths — or found new ways to embody long-held principles in the face of external disruption — rather than engaging in wholesale change. The rest described changes that have been at least moderately transformative for their organizations and, in a few cases, rose to the level of significant change. This is not to suggest that these organizations' change journeys are complete; most are still in the process of ongoing transformation and likely will be for some time.

For the most part, interviewees **foregrounded transformations that have to do with how they go about their work, both internally and in relationship with artists, partners, and community members, rather than with what they put on stage or on their walls.** As one said, "Programmatically, the organization is similar. Everything else about it is different." To be sure, there were appreciable changes for many organizations in the kind of work that they've programmed. But the locus of change for many of them was in the processes by which they curate, interpret, produce, and/or present artistic work and in the values, systems, and relationships that guide their internal organizational culture — not in simply choosing to exhibit different artworks or stage different productions. The way that these organizations chose to tell their change stories demonstrates that they believe that delivering cultural experiences that will resonate with an increasingly diverse population lies not only in what the art is, but in how the organization operates internally, what it names as its values and civic responsibilities, and how it works in and with its communities.

HOW DID ARTSAMPLIFIED PARTNERS CHANGE?

1. Deepened and expanded community engagement
2. Institutionalized and activated commitments to civic and social impact
3. Changed staffing structures and personnel
4. Initiated, advanced, or completed major capital projects
5. Transformed internal organizational culture
6. Invested in programmatic experimentation and innovation
7. Strengthened capacity for long-term, strategic decision-making
8. Stabilized financial position



Photo by Susana Millman, courtesy Silkroad

Each of these dimensions is described in further detail below. This evaluation does not claim that ArtsAmplified is the only, or even primary, driver of these changes. As discussed in the introduction to this report, the initiative deliberately engaged organizations that were already undertaking change. One said, “This grant aligned at a time when we were exploring some very fundamental institutional change.” ArtsAmplified certainly played a role in the partners’ change journeys, which is explored further beginning on page 24. But these changes were driven and enabled by a constellation of factors, both internal and external to each

organization; ArtsAmplified was only one of the enabling conditions that made such change possible. Furthermore, this evaluation was not designed to externally validate the impact of organizational change efforts through input from community partners, other funders, or sector stakeholders. It cannot account for whether community members actually feel that they’ve been centered in program development, for instance, nor whether these changes have affected who shows up for organizations’ programming.

Thirteen⁵ of the 15 ArtsAmplified partners described changes or evolutions that entailed **deepening and expanding community engagement** across the institution. This includes adopting a range of strategies that are meant to center community members — their voices, interests, and needs — in the design, development, and execution of artistic programming, from doing more work in partnership with community-based organizations to directly inviting community members into curatorial practices, artistic planning, and program design. As one ArtsAmplified partner said, “We’ve grown a lot in how intentional we are about the way we approach community engagement. We directly involve our community to make sure that we’re providing value, that we’re staying attuned to any needs and opportunities. We solicit feedback from community members in how we design programs.”

A critical part of this work has been proactively and intentionally building deeper and more equitable relationships with community members and collaborators. In many cases, ArtsAmplified partners had to start by simply showing up in others’ spaces and slowly building trust. One said, “[A] challenge was building trust with our collaborators.... That building of trust took a lot of time. I think we’re in a different place now ... but at the beginning, there was a lot of suspicion there. We’re an old, established, predominantly white institution taking on topics in our current society that go far beyond the bounds of what people think of as [us].” In the early stages of this organization’s first large-scale project that involved co-design with community, it had to address questions from the community head-on about who has the right and authority to tell certain stories and to slowly build trust around the idea of a co-constructed, co-owned narrative.

Relationship building also involves a lot of listening. One ArtsAmplified partner said, “You can’t have this emphasis on relationship building and trust building without an equal emphasis on listening. That is something I think the organization has committed to and grown in.” One of the newer leaders in the cohort spoke about taking advantage of the short but precious window of time after they arrived to immerse themselves in the life of the community, listen to community members’ hopes and needs, and get an authentic picture of the

“You can’t have this emphasis on relationship building and trust building without an equal emphasis on listening. That is something I think the organization has committed to and grown in.”

ArtsAmplified partner

⁵As noted in the introduction, this is the number of organizations whose interviewees responded to interview questions about how their organizations had changed since 2018 with an answer consistent with this dimension. The number of organizations that actually changed in ways that are consistent with this dimension may be greater.

relationship between institution and community: “I lived above a tavern in the downtown for months and got to know the community.... I lived there, not away from there.... And instead of ... feedback about [the institution] coming from a sort of tidied-up version, [it] was really direct, person-to-person at the pizza parlor, in the café, at the bank, playing pool in the bar. All those things helped me really understand a lot quickly.... Being a new leader, if you choose to listen ... there’s a very thin window in which they’re going to tell you various kinds of truths.”

Many organizations have also had to get accustomed to giving up some of their own control over artistic and programmatic processes and products, essentially sharing their visioning and decision-making authority with community. One shared, “[A community partner] said, ‘Thank you for not presenting us with the menu but inviting us to shape what’s on the menu.’ ... It was, to a certain extent, ceding curatorial control. Instead of saying, ‘This is what we think you need as a community,’ [we’re asking], ‘What is it that you think you need?’ And we will help find the artist.” For many, this means letting go of some long-held beliefs about the role of the artistic director or curator. One former leader of an ArtsAmplified partner organization said, “It was hard, because I had to erase myself out of the process — and my knowledge and my belief — to ... lead with what [participants] say.... That was hard for me because it’s an immense amount of trust. And I need to practice what I preach, and I trust these people.” Making explicit changes to organizational values or organizational structure has helped to elevate community engagement as an institutional priority. Changes of this nature included: naming that partnership with community should be commensurate in importance with artistic output; creating a Director of Community Engagement position; and establishing a Community Engagement board committee. For some, amplifying community engagement has also influenced what values and skills they look for when selecting artists to collaborate with, shifting their organizations, in the words of one staff member, “towards artists who are likely going to want to be engaged with the communities that are seeing the work.”

Nine ArtsAmplified partners described undertaking change to **clarify, institutionalize, and activate commitments to civic and social impact**. In other words, they’ve been attempting to fulfill a promise to leverage the arts and their institutional influence in service to the public good by making an outward-facing mission more central to all that they do. As one described it, “One essential change for us has been the centering of our mission in everything we do. Not just ... a side project but ... integrated into the work.” Change along this dimension has, for many, involved working hand-in-hand with changes intended to deepen community engagement. (Eight organizations cited that both dimensions applied to them.) For some, a deeper commitment to civic impact motivated greater engagement with their communities. For others, increased community engagement deepened their sense of civic responsibility.

“One essential change for us has been the centering of our mission in everything we do. Not just ... a side project but ... integrated into the work.”

ArtsAmplified partner

Several emphasized that civic impact and the public good have always been a part of their institutional “DNA.” But they seem to be privileging their external impact in institutional and artistic decision-making today in a way that they weren’t previously. (For some, this shift started well ahead of ArtsAmplified.) In years past, these organizations might have chosen artistic work to present or produce and then created an educational program or other impact-generating program around it. Now, they seem more inclined to start with the civic or social impact they hope to achieve and then figure out what to program accordingly. For instance, a few ArtsAmplified partners are now intentionally programming work that invites the audience to engage in civic dialogue and action — and sometimes also building engagement mechanisms around the work to support dialogue and action. Some organizations are intentionally emphasizing work that amplifies traditionally marginalized voices and stories. For example, one spoke of how their work “is in wanting to envision the world that we want to be in and build a road and walk that road from here to there.” For this organization, activating that responsibility means, in part, “re-storying” the narrative of the American past to more fully and accurately account for colonization and indigeneity, immigration, race, and otherness.

A couple of ArtsAmplified partners described engaging in explicit community action and advocacy work, acting on behalf of and in partnership with the communities they hoped to serve. For example, one spoke about revisiting recommendations from a broad-based community planning process executed a few years earlier. The organization hopes to “help [with] the things that a community is calling for,” including undertaking an urban renewal project in partnership with the municipal government. Other ArtsAmplified partners described becoming more willing to respond to their communities’ needs in ways that leverage the full breadth of the organization’s expertise and resources — and not only through an artistic lens. For example, one said, “Let’s hear our community when they’re saying, ‘We’re struggling with this.’ Let’s be that place where you can find a resource beyond artistry. How do we give you a [work of art] but also allow you to get involved in the action that is needed to protect your people?” This interviewee also spoke of continuing a pandemic-era mutual aid fund for community members.

“Let’s hear our community when they’re saying, ‘We’re struggling with this.’ Let’s be that place where you can find a resource beyond artistry.”

ArtsAmplified partner

Nine organizations described undergoing substantial changes to **staffing structures and personnel** during the period that coincides with ArtsAmplified. In a couple of cases, these changes were the result of succession processes initiated before ArtsAmplified began. In other cases, changes were made that accelerated efforts to deepen community engagement and activate civic impact. For example, as previously noted, one created a new

Director of Community Engagement position; another increased staffing responsible for public programming; and another hired a leading practitioner in community-centered artmaking into a key senior leadership position. A couple of ArtsAmplified partners undertook or are in the midst of organizational restructuring processes. One is restructuring in order to accommodate the level of staff growth necessary to become a facility operator for the first time. A senior leader at this organization said, “We have gone from six people to currently 12, to what will be 30 in 2026,” and another added “I’m very conscious that we need to develop a middle management.... We have a leadership team ... but we need people who are in the middle, who can initiate, who can drive as well and make decisions.”

Seven described initiating, advancing, and/or completing **major capital projects** during ArtsAmplified,⁶ including redeveloping existing performance or exhibition spaces and building entirely new spaces. For these organizations, their facilities projects have become literal and conceptual spaces for activating their community engagement and civic leadership work. For instance, the ArtsAmplified partner mentioned above that hired a leading practitioner in community-centered artmaking made preparing for a new home one of that person’s key responsibilities. This individual is actively helping the organization “center our work in community ... [and] build community as central to what we do.” With respect to that charge, the new building is an opportunity “to write a new chapter where people feel like they are a part of that chapter, where we are bringing people along, where they don’t have to go into a space where maybe they came before and didn’t feel welcome.” They added, “It’s not even about the building. It’s what we do inside of it.... These four walls allow us to activate certain things about our mission and grow it.”

Six ArtsAmplified partners described transforming their **internal organizational culture**⁷ — particularly in the context of opening up institutional decision-making processes to include more staff and artist ownership. This work often progressed in conjunction with other dimensions of change. For instance, some spoke about how the organization’s objectives around sharing authority with their communities called for this kind of opening up. One said, “There’s tremendous change we need to see in the world. If you don’t have a staff internally who feels comfortable and confident in working across difference, it doesn’t matter how much you financially resource it, it’s not going to grow. It’s going to break. There was a lot of work that was done internally.”

⁶ Two others had completed major capital expansions just prior to the start of ArtsAmplified.

⁷ A review of ArtsAmplified proposals, reports, and theories of change suggests that more than six advanced some sort of organizational culture change during this period. But only six articulated key dimensions of change in these terms during interviews.



Photo by Nile Hawver, courtesy The Huntington

“We’ve created that culture of ‘people first.’ What I mean by that is not only taking care of audiences and artists but also taking care of ourselves as staff members.... If you can’t show up and do the work, then you can’t help the people you say you want to help.”

ArtsAmplified partner

Others described leadership change as a necessary precursor to effectively including more voices (both internal and external to the organization) in the artistic process. Within one organization, a non-programmatic staff member said, “One thing that has changed is that [new leadership] really opened up the artistic process to the whole staff and welcomed people in. That was not the case before.... It was a very closed-off, walled-off process.... From a staff perspective, [as] someone who’s not in the artistic department, I personally feel much more a part of the art-making than I did before.” Implicit in this, and in similar stories told by other organizations, is a challenge to old orthodoxies about the artistic director or curators as the ultimate arbiter of artistic excellence — replaced with the belief that inviting staff or community members into the artistic or curatorial decision-making process can help cultivate more authentic participation, ownership, and belonging in it. In the words of another organization, “We’ve transformed from a very artist-centered organization to an artist-and-staff-centered organization. We’ve really built a sense of belonging.”

Also implicit in the stories that these organizations told about internal culture change was a core commitment to practicing inclusion and nurturing belonging. Though many ArtsAmplified partners engaged in work related to antiracism or diversity, equity, and inclusion during this period, none explicitly said that “becoming antiracist” was a key dimension along which they changed. Instead, these ideas seem suffused throughout the change work they’ve done internally — as well as the way many have embraced community engagement and deepened their sense of civic responsibility. That said, two of the theater organizations in the ArtsAmplified cohort pointed to the “We See You White American Theatre” movement — which came to prominence during the fieldwide examination of how racism and oppression show up in arts and culture organizations shortly after the 2020 murder of George Floyd — as both catalyst and framework for internal culture change. One said, “The ‘We See You White American Theatre’ — which we took very much to heart and made some real substantive changes in how we conduct rehearsals and work with our artists, in work-life balance for our staff. I think there’s been a pretty major culture shift within the organization, and that was very intentional in response to that organization’s list of — I think they called them ‘demands.’” Belonging and inclusion work seems to have gone hand-in-hand with work that some ArtsAmplified partners have done to cultivate a more deliberate culture of care for staff and for artists. One said, “We’ve created that culture of ‘people first.’ What I mean by that is not only taking care of audiences and artists but also taking care of ourselves as staff members.... If you can’t show up and do the work, then you can’t help the people you say you want to help.”

Five ArtsAmplified partners described changes in terms of **greater programmatic experimentation and innovation**. This includes programming bolder and more ambitious artistic work, as well as innovating in how audiences experience the work. With respect to the former, a couple of organizations described this as a period in which they felt enabled to invest in more cutting-edge work — in part because of the access to risk capital afforded to them by ArtsAmplified. With respect to the latter, a few organizations described experimenting with

ways to make the art museum visitor experience more fun or taking steps to introduce more variety into the performing arts-going experience. As one described it, “I felt like all of the experiences were similar even though the [works] were different, and I was really interested in shaking that up.... Trying some things that are a little more raw, a little more minimal, and with real intentionality around the intimate experience.”

Four organizations described strengthening their **capacity for long-term, strategic decision-making** during this period. In particular, they spoke of having a much stronger sense of alignment among staff and with their boards around a shared strategic vision now than they did in 2017, which is almost certainly connected to their efforts to define organizational values and strengthen organizational culture. One described adopting a strategic plan for the first time and “living it as opposed to filing it.” Another said that, at the beginning of ArtsAmplified, their culture “felt very much like a constellation of stars floating around in a shared universe; everyone existed together, but there wasn’t necessarily collaboration, communication, clear work, and thinking happening cohesively.” Since participating in the initiative, they’ve shifted to much greater alignment. Another described adopting a much more intentional approach to long-term decision-making.

Finally, three partners shared that they’d changed in terms of **stabilizing their overall financial position**. This includes reaching specific milestones like establishing an endowment or solidifying their working capital base. As discussed on page 22, a number of organizations also invested meaningfully in their internal development and fundraising capacity as a means of supporting community-centered and civic-minded work, which doesn’t lend itself easily to earned-revenue business models.

What conditions enabled change?

ArtsAmplified provided only some of the enabling conditions that made all of this change possible. Before turning to the role that ArtsAmplified played, this section explores some of the other factors⁸ that supported change during this period — a few of which are also conditions that made the work more challenging.

A prime example of a condition that both supported and challenged change — and, perhaps, the defining feature of the period in which ArtsAmplified unfolded — was, of course, **the COVID-19 pandemic**. As one former leader put it, “COVID is the event of this period. COVID is the overriding, profoundly unexpected, and most impactful event during this period of time.” Others, both current and former staff, used words like “derailment,” “lost momentum,” and “disruption” to describe the impact that the pandemic had on them. Yet many described the pandemic as a generative opportunity to pause, reflect, and engage in transformational organizational culture work or work to deepen their civic leadership and sense of community connection. One said, “The pandemic was this big obstacle, but it was also this big opportunity. It was an opportunity to pause and really audit how we were serving and living our mission.” It gave them time to focus internally, without the day-to-day exigencies of programming. And, in the way that the pandemic became inextricably bound up in the national conversation about racial justice, it prodded them to engage in new kinds of conversations internally, to reflect on their relationships with and responsibilities to neighboring communities, and to reimagine the kind of internal culture they wanted to operate in. One described it as an important opportunity to put to the test values that they’d been starting to articulate in the couple of years prior: “One amazing thing that happened because of COVID was that the board was faced with an immediate and unexpected moment of living its values or not living its values. The values that we’d articulated around DEAI — when it came time, the board said, ‘We will not lay anyone off. We will keep this staff intact.’” The pandemic also brought with it a wave of public and private relief funding (especially for those eligible for the “Shuttered Venues” relief that was part of the American Rescue Plan Act) that, temporarily, buoyed organizations’ financial footing.

⁸Because these factors came up in response to several different interview questions, we have not attempted to tabulate how many organizations provided answers that are consistent with each of the factors described here.

Another factor that both supported and challenged change in this period was **leadership succession and staff turnover** — much of it happening during or immediately after the pandemic years. This was a period of significant staff turnover at ArtsAmplified partner organizations; as of the spring of 2025, 13 of the 15 organizations had experienced turnover in a key leadership position. (As has been amply documented, the pandemic spurred a “Great Resignation” across many industries in 2021; this was, by no means, an ArtsAmplified-specific trend. As discussed on page 24, ArtsAmplified eased some new leaders’ transitions into the Massachusetts arts community.) While disruptive, many staff changes became opportunities to accelerate organizational change. Leadership change helped a few organizations to include more voices in the artistic decision-making process, as described above. Staff turnover at the sub-leadership level also provided an opportunity to bring in people with a more natural proclivity to work in new ways — especially in ways that involve greater community input into the work. One of the art museums in the cohort said, “There are a lot of curators who prioritize the privilege of their own authority and expertise in their approach to their work, and that’s not true of the curators we’ve hired,” adding that staff attrition is “an inflection point that one doesn’t always have control over, but it can have a lot of impact within an organization.”



Photo by Robert Benson Photography, courtesy Jacob’s Pillow

Several ArtsAmplified partners pointed to the importance of **articulating and socializing institutional values**, in support of a shared vision, in order to effectively make change. This was particularly salient for organizations

“Before you can go out and build these relationships and invite community and co-create with community, you have to know who you are. You have to know what your values are and what the invitation to be in relationship with an organization means.”

ArtsAmplified partner

— while also giving them some extra space to do the hard work of defining values. One described the role that vision played in their change journey this way: “We were very good problem-solvers. But the challenge is to undertake and encounter those problems within a strategic viewpoint and a strategic mindset.... COVID, DEI, all of those factors only reinforced ... the notion of having a clear strategic vision of the future to guide what is just constant problem-solving.... Without that, I think none of this kind of change would have been as cohesive or as sticky as it’s been.” ArtsAmplified also helped organizations create the space to do this important work.

Advancing change requires **financial resources**. One ArtsAmplified partner stated it plainly: “It’s money.... That is what it is.” This is an important way in which the initiative directly contributed to organizations’ change journeys (and is explored further on pages 28 and 29). ArtsAmplified provided funding that organizations invested directly in change work, while also serving as a reliable source of general operating funds that gave them some breathing room to engage with change. One said, “Let’s be real: a lot of the inclusion work ... requires energy, requires resources, requires a will in the organization to do it.... If we had to fight for our financial stability all the time, it would kind of suck out all of our energies.” Being able to invest strategically

in risk-taking (through, for instance, a designated Innovation Fund) was especially valuable in advancing programmatic change. One partner described such investments as having “the most immediate impact on the organization and its ability to start new initiatives or accelerate existing ideas.”

A few organizations emphasized, however, that the scale of funding required for real change exceeds what any one funder — Barr included — is typically willing to provide. As one said, “To really execute and deliver on change takes a level of investment that most people would choke at. Another \$100,000 or \$200,000 a year is nice, but it’s not terribly effective if you want to fundamentally change or accelerate what the organization is doing.”

Relatedly, a handful of organizations made significant investments in their **development and fundraising capacity** during ArtsAmplified (and, often, with the support of ArtsAmplified resources), adding development staff and boosting the sophistication of their fundraising infrastructure. For example, a couple moved to more sophisticated customer relationship management (CRM) platforms and developed new protocols around data management and analytics. These organizations saw these investments as essential support for the community-centered and civic-minded work they wanted to be doing more of, opening up pathways to support work that centered impact beyond a transactional relationship with audience members. One said, “We planted a lot of seeds of dreams of things that we thought could really work and benefit more [people] ... They just sat there for a little while ... But they came into being, not coincidentally, once we built up a development team that can build the support around making them actually happen.” This organization added that “because of the structural inequalities built into our system,” a business model that relies primarily on earned revenue is especially challenging to “creat[e] pathways to equally serve the whole city.”

Many ArtsAmplified partners noted the important role that having an **engaged, committed board** played in their change journeys. Not only were board members a source of financial support, but they also co-led change with staff leadership and encouraged bold strategic thinking. One said, “It’s impossible to talk about this without talking about the fierceness of our Board of Trustees. There is a ferocious belief in leadership, that there is no shrinking our way to glory.... There is unbelievable strategy — at looking at this as a long game, in terms of us doing the big important things and not just surviving. With the goal being that we’re thriving well beyond our time here. I’ve never seen that degree of expertise, strategy, and really putting their resources where their mouth is in any other board.” For some organizations, their board’s support for change earned buy-in from staff for new directions: “The board’s support for this direction was very crucial to having it be so accepted across the staff. The board was sort of a visible cheerleader for the direction, and that means a lot to the staff.”

“We planted a lot of seeds of dreams of things that we thought could really work and benefit more [people] ... They just sat there for a little while ... But they came into being, not coincidentally, once we built up a development team that can build the support around making them actually happen.”

ArtsAmplified partner

For some ArtsAmplified partners, their board’s enthusiasm for change was, itself, an outcome of the change work they engaged in, both leading up to and during the initiative. For instance, efforts to open up the artistic decision-making process to more voices contributed to board ownership just as much as staff ownership. One said, “Opening up the artistic process has also helped in terms of our communication ... and the way in which our board has access to it.... They’ve been invited into the process, and they feel included and welcomed in. And therefore, you have understanding and appreciation.” A couple of organizations mentioned that they had done intentional work to shift the culture of their boards toward more honest, open, and transparent communication. One described that work this way: “One of the very first things I heard [after joining the organization] from a couple of board members was, ‘It doesn’t happen at the board meeting, it happens after the board meeting.’ Basically, the first board meeting [was] me saying, ‘I want to create a culture where anything you want to say, you say [it] in the room.’ There was mystery around what the minimum

giving level was. [At the f]irst Philanthropy Committee meeting [I asked,] ‘Could we just talk about this?’” A couple of the executive and artistic leaders who joined their organizations during ArtsAmplified noted how their boards’ evolving commitment to community centeredness and civic leadership, especially around equity and inclusion, was made evident during their own hiring processes. One said, “I was asked a lot of really challenging tough questions about social equity and my commitment — specifically because of the Barr Foundation funding just to be really blunt about it — throughout my entire hiring process. That’s impact, that’s change, and that’s important.”

Finally, most ArtsAmplified partners relied on a suite of **change-management skills, mindsets, and perspectives** throughout their change journeys (and continue to today). For instance, some emphasized the importance of making space for mistakes, productive failure, and iteration (which, as discussed on pages 26 and 27, was supported by the overall ArtsAmplified ethos). One said, “We are trying to do ambitious things. Sometimes it will be messy, and sometimes it will take us a while to get there. Sometimes we have to take a step back to take two steps forward.” Another echoed this sentiment saying, “The space to be able to make mistakes is a big part of it.” Others spoke compellingly about having the courage to let go of programming that was no longer serving a new direction — or, even, of audience members or donors who felt alienated by the organization centering inclusion and belonging. One said, “We got to a point in our evolution [where] we were like, ‘It’s okay if we lose people. We’re not going to worry about it. We know what we’re doing.’ We know we’re creating a culture of belonging for everyone. And if people don’t want to see that because it’s a more diverse space, that’s not on us.” Others noted that change simply takes time — and that recognizing and planning for that is actually harder than it sounds. A senior staff member cited this as a key lesson of the period, borne of the lived experience of trying to do too much all at once: “We really had to come back from that and slow everything way down and really focus on one aspect of things at a time.... A big learning for me is: Slow down. Really think about what you can take on and what you should take on.”

“We got to a point in our evolution [where] we were like, ‘It’s okay if we lose people. We’re not going to worry about it. We know what we’re doing.’”

ArtsAmplified partner

In interview conversations, most ArtsAmplified leaders seemed reluctant to take personal credit for their organizations’ progress in making change. One even said, “I’m trying to take myself out of it, though I don’t think you can. I think leadership actually can matter. It doesn’t always, but [it] can.” A few did note that leadership plays an important role in “modeling” vulnerability, humility, and trust building throughout the change-management process. For example, one said, “If you do not have trust in a staff,

then you can’t weather change. So [we’re] taking the time to do the work to establish trust as best we can. That’s not that [we] have gained the trust of everyone on our staff, but we’ve actually said that it’s important to us that we have your trust.” It appears that many ArtsAmplified leaders tried to lean into this modeling role more and more over the years, either bringing it in as new leaders or consciously treating it as an area for personal growth.

How did ArtsAmplified enable change?

The change that ArtsAmplified partner organizations undertook and advanced over the last eight years was enabled by many conditions, including ArtsAmplified itself. ArtsAmplified directly invested financial resources for change, provided structure and thought partnership to support change, and compounded the positive effect of many of the factors described above. As one ArtsAmplified partner said, “This has been a really special source of light in a dark room in some moments. We could do so much more and get so much further and [be] so much more rigorous because of the way in which that support was extended.” A causal connection can’t be drawn between ArtsAmplified and the changes realized by these organizations — a sentiment echoed by one of the partners who said, “It was helpful, and it was part of the mix. But it’s ... awfully hard to go cause-effect in a direct line on any particular issue.” But we can pinpoint some of the distinctive attributes of ArtsAmplified that helped to make change possible.⁹

All 15 partners cited being **part of the ArtsAmplified cohort and convening with other practitioners** as a unique and valuable part of the ArtsAmplified experience. Many valued the opportunity to simply be in conversation and community with other arts practitioners — which they see as relatively rare in Massachusetts. One said, “We really appreciate the cohort conversation. It has been years since the field has been brought together by anyone. I believe in the community-building part of it, which was, I thought, enormously helpful.” The ArtsAmplified community served as a stable, consistent source of collegiality — and even solidarity — during a turbulent period. This was particularly valuable for those who assumed new leadership roles during the initiative, many of whom came on board when the pandemic was still limiting the opportunity to be with other arts practitioners. As one said, “Especially as a new leader, [the cohort] was really critical. I came in at a time that we were just thinking about being back in person again. So there was no ‘let me take you to lunch or coffee’ with a lot of leaders. I was very glad that reaching out to folks didn’t have to be a cold email.” Another called ArtsAmplified a “container for us to socialize and build these relationships,” adding: “Having just come to town to be in the same room with [leaders at other organizations] — that doesn’t happen in most cities. It takes years to cross paths. And this was not only putting you in the same room, but also with shared experiences and a vocabulary.”

The cohort was not only a container in which to socialize with other practitioners. Many found the opportunity to convene to be an important forum for sharing perspectives, ideas, and information that guided and strengthened their own work. One said, “It was really great to meet colleagues, some of whom were working with the same community [as us]. How folks were experimenting in their own communities, or opening spaces, offering new programs — it was really exciting to actually hear what other folks were doing.” Others spoke about how the cohort contextualized their own efforts in illuminating ways. A few pointed to specific working relationships that they’d developed through the cohort, both peer-mentorship connections and collaborations between different organizations. One described building a peer-mentorship relationship with a staff member at another ArtsAmplified partner organization: “I became very good friends with [them]. I had never talked to anyone on staff there before, and we were able to build a relationship.... And we were able to help each other talk through issues and problem solve. Those connections have been key, I think, to where we are now because I certainly learned a lot.”



Photo courtesy The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

⁹Once again, the number of organizations referenced throughout this section is the number of organizations whose interviewees responded to interview questions about the distinctive and valuable features of ArtsAmplified with an answer consistent with each category. The number of organizations that actually valued ArtsAmplified in each of these ways may be greater.

However, representatives of a dozen partner organizations — including a number of former leaders — indicated their sense that the ArtsAmplified cohort didn't quite live up to their initial expectations for it. Some focused on the cohort's perceived failure to function as a learning community with a shared, cohesive learning agenda.¹⁰ One current leader hypothesized that there hadn't been enough of an initial long-term vision and plan for the learning, which led it to feel "a little stop and start." They added, "I wish that there had been a little more clarity entering into it what that component would look like and then have it be plotted out further in the future, so that there was more of a thread there.... That was a little bit of a missed opportunity. They had the ingredients there. The only thing they didn't have was some pretty long-term planning." One former leader cited the evolving slate of consultants involved in the initiative as a factor saying, "The learning agenda never quite, in my opinion, got solidified. There were a series of consultants in and out, so the arc of learning was hard. It felt like almost every gathering, this is a new approach. So it was just a lot harder to think about it in terms of an arc." None of the interviewees seemed to recall a deliberate and intentional shift away from shared learning toward organization-specific learning, though their attention was likely focused on the pandemic when that shift was made.

"I don't think we really had the opportunity to take full advantage of it because of the interruption of COVID. We were starting to get some of that delicious trust among each other, and we were having some really deep and interesting conversations.... That got so deeply interrupted by the pandemic that I don't think we got the full potential of what we could have gained."

ArtsAmplified partner

to collective action and, I think, it's just a hard thing to bring about." A few also indicated that there may not have been sufficient time and attention paid to building a true sense of shared identity among the partner organizations — which would have been necessary to develop a shared change agenda. A former leader said, "The groups weren't ready to work together ... and didn't have a shared sense of language or shared sense of even how to behave around funders and around each other." A couple of people suggested that inconsistency in which staff members attended cohort convenings and events may have stymied the group in becoming a true collective, with one current staff member wondering if it would have been helpful "to say the executive director must be [there]."¹¹ And a couple pointed to interpersonal dynamics — inter-organization competitiveness; posturing or performing for the funder — that may have made it difficult for the group to come together as a collective. This observation came up among many of the former leaders, suggesting that it may have been driven as much by specific personalities that were in the cohort at its beginning but have since left ArtsAmplified organizations, as by the structure of the cohort.

The disruptive impact of the pandemic on the cohort can't be overstated, and a few individuals directly acknowledged this. One current staff member said, "I don't think we really had the opportunity to take full advantage of it because of the interruption of COVID. We were starting to get some of that delicious trust among each other, and we were having some really deep and interesting conversations.... That got so deeply interrupted by the pandemic that I don't think we got the full potential of what we could have gained." The fact that so many former leaders offered a critical appraisal of the cohort is likely related, at least in part, to the

Others focused on how the cohort never quite became a venue for identifying shared goals and developing plans for collective action on a shared agenda for fieldwide change. One put it succinctly: "As single entities, I think we've been quite successful. As a joint venture, I think we have fallen short." They acknowledged that enabling such a diverse group of organizations to take collective action is a tall order and suggested that the cohort probably needed an internal leadership structure if it were to succeed in advancing a shared agenda. One former leader said, "There would have had to have been a driving force and an overarching leadership structure which was powerful enough to overcome all the other stresses and strains on people's time.... It's overcoming enormous obstacles

¹⁰As discussed in the introduction of this report, initiative leadership made a deliberate decision to move away from collective learning activities based on input from cohort members.

¹¹ Executive leaders were required to attend some of the early cohort gatherings, but this requirement was relaxed for many later gatherings.



Photo courtesy MASS MoCA

pandemic too; many left when the cohort was most disrupted and were not present as different kinds of cohort gatherings were reestablished in more recent years. Still, there seems to be some latent appetite for the kind of substantive shared learning agenda that was ultimately downplayed during the co-design process. One newer staff member essentially articulated a wish for the more robust shared learning agenda that was explored in the initiative's early years: "We had these events that I would call networking, and that was great. And we did have a couple of sessions where there was some discussion with facilitated questions. But I think it would have been good to, maybe once a year, [have] a convening

where Barr is identifying, with the help of the participants, some things where they bring in a speaker or they do some in-depth conversation on a particular topic. Some mutual learning."

Finally, it merits noting that a couple of the leaders of color who were interviewed (both currently and formerly with partner organizations) offered thoughtful appraisals of how racial equity remained only at the periphery of the ArtsAmplified cohort. One described their perception that ArtsAmplified relied on a disproportionately white consultant pool,¹² saying that the initiative "center[ed] the expert as white people." This former leader added, "It's hard to be a person of color, knowing what Barr is investing in, and every time you enter the room, all the consultants are white." A current leader of color described their perception of the cohort as "still primarily white leadership;¹³ the voices of color were minimal," and went on to describe how that made it hard to directly confront racial equity as a shared civic issue: "We're talking about civic issues, but we're really ignoring that the big civic issue that you want to address is around racial equity.... We live in a society that does not want to hit the iceberg. We just want to steadily stroll and coast along, but until we confront things head on, we're just going to continue decades of harm." One white former leader, on the other hand, argued that the cohort prioritized issues of identity, inclusion, and equity at the expense of other civic issues — which, perhaps, demonstrates how wide ranging the perspectives were among the initial roster of leaders.

"The fact that the Foundation was so open to their work evolving and to some of their efforts missing the mark meant that the organizations could, in the words of one staff member, "experiment and take risks and learn from failures and also learn from successes."

ArtsAmplified partner

Thirteen ArtsAmplified partners cited the **overall spirit of partnership and trust** created by the Barr Foundation throughout the initiative as an important feature of it. They described it as a unique combination of being given latitude to chart their own course while also being rigorously supported with thought partnership. One former leader said, "They took seriously the idea of doing this in partnership. [They] wanted each institution to define the problem themselves. Barr clearly guided us and put a framework around it. But I think they were dead serious that they didn't want to sweep in from the outside and ... superimpose a set of goals.... That felt real to me." Another described the Foundation as shaping their work with "really soft hands." Several also homed in on Barr's genuine commitment to learning, which manifested as a healthy attitude toward the role of iteration and productive failure in making change. One current leader said, "It was an invitation to be very honest. We always like to say that ArtsAmplified loves to hear where we ran into problems. They loved to hear what issues didn't work out the way we may have thought. And we believe that, because they were honest about that, therefore all conversations seem to be much less performative, really us all working together with them." The fact that

¹² While the long-term consultants involved over the course of the initiative identify as white, there were multiple consultants of color involved throughout.

¹³ Note that we do not have comprehensive data on the racial composition of ArtsAmplified leaders.

the Foundation was so open to their work evolving and to some of their efforts missing the mark meant that the organizations could, in the words of one staff member, “experiment and take risks and learn from failures and also learn from successes.” It also gave new leaders more latitude to respond to what they saw as their organization’s chief priorities, rather than feeling bound to a plan that addressed yesterday’s priorities.

Many of the interviewees pointed to the deep humanity at the core of Barr’s organizational DNA, as well as the specific people who comprise the Barr Arts & Creativity Team, as the source of that sense of true partnership.

One said, “There’s an empathy that seems to be baked into the DNA of the Barr Foundation — but specifically to this team — where they legitimately care about how we’re doing as people and legitimately care about the things we’re going through,” while another called Barr “funding with a face.” One senior leader spoke about how the Director of the Arts & Creativity program, San San Wong, got in touch with them at a particularly challenging institutional inflection point: “San San is the only funder ... that reached out to me personally to see how I was, to see if I needed anything.... It was meaningful. It exemplifies the true care and partnership to support and accompany the organization.” Another described Wong as “wanting to wrestle with the unsexy problems,” adding, “I feel like we can be honest about where we’re at and what’s tough and also celebrate our victories and where things are going well. And it doesn’t feel like that there’s any danger in us having that honest exchange.” Other interviewees offered similar praise for the relationships that they’d built with Program Officer Jamilah Bradshaw.



Photo by Christopher Duggan, courtesy Jacob's Pillow

Thirteen organizations indicated that the **distinctive supportive role that TDC consultants played** throughout ArtsAmplified helped to shore up the initiative’s overall spirit of partnership and trust. Checkpoints with consultants Ashley Berendt and Susan Nelson — including coaching calls and feedback on theories of change or supplemental funding requests — provided another way in which partner organizations experienced valuable thought partnership and space to iterate. One said, “It was a process of co-creation, it was a process of facilitated conversation where we could be collaborating and bouncing our ideas off of Ashley ... to really refine our thinking.” Rather than feeling like extra administrative burden in the grantmaking process, these checkpoints offered productive structure for organizations to work through the big ideas and bold changes they were undertaking. One ArtsAmplified organization called it, “the best kind of accountability. It felt a little bit like a care mechanism rather than a ‘we don’t trust that you’re going to have your homework done in time.’” Several commented on how powerful it was to be able to bounce “draft” ideas around with someone who both understood their work and the Foundation’s priorities; as much as the organizations’ relationships with Barr program staff were infused with trust, it was still meaningful to have someone with whom they could share less polished ideas. As one organization said, “The idea that the person who is giving out the money is not the same person giving you advice is powerful. You can be frank, you can figure out what your organization really needs, while you’re not also in the back of your mind going, ‘Is this looking good to my funder?’” TDC also provided a source of field context and expertise that many ArtsAmplified partners were grateful to be able to tap into — especially during the pandemic. One said, “What was most valuable about the conversations with ... Susan was that she gave us context.... There are a number of organizations who are experiencing the same thing.... It was bringing into the conversation the context of what other arts leaders and organizations were going through. That was super valuable.”

One specific role that TDC consultants played was to guide organizations in developing, and then iterating on, a theory of change for the work they were undertaking during ArtsAmplified. A few talked about the rigor that this process provided, helping them to clarify the implicit relationships between different strands of work

and name the implicit assumptions behind their strategic intentions. One former leader said, “To understand how the theory of change and our individual specific goals were integrated was enormously helpful in having a unifying vision among the staff and board.... Here’s how these things fit together in our minds, and that engaged the institution for a great deal of time in a really productive way.” The TDC consultants supported organizations in revisiting and refining their theories of change at multiple junctures throughout ArtsAmplified, which invited organizations to think flexibly and adaptively about their work while, again, giving them a trusted and knowledgeable partner to think with. A few noted that they were grateful not just for the theory of change process, but also for the documentation. For new leaders, reviewing the documentation advanced their understanding of their organization’s overall work — not just the activities supported through ArtsAmplified. One said, “It was extremely valuable as a resource, as a reference. Being able to go back and ... take stock and say, ‘Oh, three years ago or six years ago, this is what we were aiming for. What were the shifts and disruptions that either made something possible or made it not possible, or shifted the way we went about something?’” For others, this work became a living document that they used to guide planning and decision-making, or as part of onboarding new staff members throughout the initiative.

But a few found the theory of change process to be overly complicated, even when they could appreciate the rigor behind it. The language and the formatting seemed to be particular barriers to a few leaders. One called it “jargony,” while another said, “I had a hard time distinguishing between the outputs and then what would be measured.”

The **duration of ArtsAmplified**, which was identified as an enabling factor in 12 interviews, gave partner organizations a long runway to advance real change. Originally imagined as a six-year initiative, ArtsAmplified was extended to eight years of support due, in part, to the pandemic. Many grantees appreciated having the security of long-term support, which enabled them to take on bigger organizational challenges and make longer-term commitments to artists, communities, and other partners. A former leader said, “Knowing that we could make long investments in an artist or in a project that we knew wouldn’t be solved in a year or two was huge. We didn’t have to worry about every year going back to ask for more. We were really free to dream within a certain amount of space.” The long runway was particularly important to organizations that were trying to build trust with communities that they were just beginning to establish relationships with. One described it this way: “Sometimes community members would be dubious that we actually were making a commitment beyond

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the boundaries of any single project.... We were seeding things that we couldn’t demonstrate to community members right there and then, but we could over the arc of time. And we couldn’t have done that without the gift of time to do it.” And on a practical level, the multiyear commitment alleviated fundraising burden. “It just takes so much time to put a proposal together,” said one leader. They added, “We don’t have the bandwidth to constantly start over. The grace of having something that doesn’t start from square one at the beginning of

a new fiscal year — I can’t even put to words how valuable that is for us to be able to do our actual work.” The duration also reinforced grantees’ sense of being in true partnership with the foundation; the longevity of their relationships with Barr staff engendered greater trust and comfort in speaking candidly about the challenges of the work.

Eleven described how the **unique combination of unrestricted funding plus supplemental and risk funding** reinforced the overall ethos of learning and adaptivity in the program. The backbone of ArtsAmplified was two rounds of three-year unrestricted gifts, which enabled partner organizations to invest in and sustain their core work. As one said, “The unrestricted nature of the funding allows for sustainability to factor in. Sometimes project-based grants are like: the bigger the idea, the better. But I think that the way that the ArtsAmplified funding was set up actually allows for that sustainability to be built in along the way.” Perhaps even more

important, this funding combination provided a sense of security that made it more possible for ArtsAmplified partners to focus on opportunities for change. Most needed to operate on two time horizons at once: keeping their current work going and adequately resourced in the near term, while also evolving their work toward a longer-term vision. The unrestricted support reduced the fear that something might break in the near term and make it harder to focus on longer-term change. One interviewee put it this way: “There was funding going towards general operating at the same time that there was funding going towards risk capital or change capital.... You actually had the bandwidth to focus on the big change idea because you weren’t also scrambling to make the day-to-day operating at the same time, and vice versa.” The opportunity to apply for risk capital (through two rounds of Leadership Risk Capital grants in 2022 and 2024), on top of the unrestricted support, was essential in advancing long-term change objectives. By calling it “risk,” Barr gave partner organizations both permission and encouragement to think big and experimentally and to try things that might not work. The funding enabled them to advance some of the big ideas they’d already been toying with. One said, “What the ... risk fund allowed me to do was to take some of the vision that we’d been talking about ... and be able to tangibly put four different buckets into action.” The earlier round of supplemental funding in 2019 had similar benefits and was especially helpful as a source of targeted support for capacity building and experimentation. One ArtsAmplified partner said, “It also gave us the opportunity to step back and play a little and plan a little. Let’s see how we engage our community and how that’s going to be sustainable.... Let’s play and really investigate how we can interact and impact our community maybe in a different way.”

As discussed in the introduction of this report, ArtsAmplified launched with a conceptual framework focused on the exploration of how four big ideas intersect within arts organizations: artistic excellence, relevance, risk-taking, and civic leadership.

Eight partner organizations commented on the value of the

ArtsAmplified framework in grounding their change work. It provided a structure through which to think about the change they hoped to advance without limiting the scope of what they set out to do. One called the four pillars a helpful “jumping-off point” for what they hoped to embody. Another said that the framework “was directional without putting limitations. That was one of the real hallmarks of what made this such an important grant.... It provided us with, at a time of great change, specific direction around where these funds were going.... It provided long-term goal creation around it.”

As noted, the specific lens on risk-taking was particularly valuable to a few organizations. It clarified what Barr “was seeking to empower,” as one leader put it, adding that this was also helpful framing for getting their board onside with intended change. Another echoed this idea, saying, “This framing around experimental or risk capital — very helpful. To be able to go to board members and be like, ‘We’ve got risk capital funds’ — that’s a language that they understand.” One leader, however, challenged the idea that risk funding can and should be distinct from general operating support: “There is nothing that is not risky about our operation from the get-go.... I’ve never understood how every day is not a gigantic risk. So the idea that we needed to pursue more risk, I have never been comfortable with. What I think needs to be said, like a million times over, is that stable, consistent, multiyear operating support gives us the foundation that allows us to do that.”

A few found the emphasis on civic leadership to be productively provocative in influencing their thinking about their responsibilities to their communities. One said, “When you have civic leadership as one of your columns in your theory of change, you start to articulate, and you pay attention.... We have a lot to grow in civic leadership. I think that there’s always been in the quiet DNA of the organization [something] about diversity and community, but it hasn’t been, in a focal way, articulated into the public.” Another said, “Barr really did push us to think more concretely about what [civic leadership] means and what we can do to step up to be that community leader or, at least, active participant of community well-being.”

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ArtsAmplified partner



Photo by Kathy Tarantola, courtesy the Peabody Essex Museum

A couple of interviewees — especially those who were present for the initiative’s early years — hinted that the framework confused, as much as it clarified, Barr’s goals for ArtsAmplified. The conceptual language felt academic to one or two individuals. Some suggested that the framework occasionally made it feel as though Barr had a prescriptive vision for what partner organizations should be trying to achieve — but that Barr wasn’t quite coming out and telling the partners what that vision was. One said, “I think there was a definition of civic leadership that Barr wanted us to somehow speak to and fulfill. But we didn’t know what that was, and so there was a lot of back and forth. We can define how we think

about civic leadership, but it wasn’t matching what Barr was looking to hear.” As already noted, the framework was less central to ArtsAmplified in its later years than it was at its launch. This critique was not raised by the newer leaders in the cohort, and a couple of the longer-term participants noted their gratitude for how the focus on the framework evolved. One said, “The initiative started off really academic. There were those pillars — we want to engage in civic leadership, all those different things.... As the years went on ... it almost seems like they became more like guideposts, as opposed to, ‘We’re going to be really strict in following these.’... As the cohort went on, it [felt] like [Barr was] less interested in being, ‘We prescriptively want to hear about these pillars and your progress against them,’ and more, ‘What actually has changed in your organizations and where are you?’”

In fact, eight partner organizations noted their general gratitude for how the initiative evolved in response to their needs and to changing external circumstances over its eight years through the co-design process. This was especially true during the pandemic, when Barr made a number of changes to grantmaking requirements, expectations around supplemental funds, and cohort convenings while still aiming to support grantees in advancing their long-term goals. One said, “When the pandemic happened, the Barr Foundation still held the cohort to what we applied to but also met with each organization to find out what we needed to ensure we could continue our work.... They worked closely with each group to customize what our needs [were] ... while staying true to ArtsAmplified goals.... That felt very respectful and like a true partner.” A few noted that Barr had been actively listening to their needs from the very beginning and adapting accordingly. For instance, cohort convenings were adapted in direct response to grantee feedback; one said, “I’ve always felt like in those convenings, they aren’t always deciding what to do or how to do them based on what they want, but it’s really an active sort of listening approach that they take. And then try to respond to that to the best of their ability, both individually with institutions and as part of the cohort.” One noted how regularly ArtsAmplified partners were asked to provide feedback: “The way that they create space for how this relationship has grown ... ‘Don’t wait to give us feedback. Talk to us about what you need and adjustments along the way.’ Which almost makes it hard to reflect on what could be different or better, because it’s always responsive in a way that I appreciate deeply.” Others specifically cited Barr’s willingness to relax reporting requirements and expectations about revising theories of change, as well as how the ArtsAmplified framework became less central over time (discussed above).

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ArtsAmplified partner

Conclusion

The work that the 15 ArtsAmplified partner organizations have done over the last eight years to weather the pandemic and other changes in their operating environments, while also advancing their own bold, progressive visions for change is admirable. Their stories offer a glimpse into how Massachusetts arts organizations are navigating the kinds of big questions that motivated ArtsAmplified in the first place. ArtsAmplified partner organizations are forging relevance by centering community in the design and development of their work and engaging with the civic and social issues affecting their communities. They're opening up the artistic decision-making process to include more, and more diverse, voices and experiences while sustaining rigor, innovation, and experimentation. They're investing in risk-taking strategically and in ways that effectively balance short-term imperatives and long-term aspirations. They're taking civic action on behalf of and in partnership with the communities they seek to serve and engage, and they're expanding our understanding of the role of an arts organization in contributing to civic change.



Photo courtesy The Theater Offensive

The ArtsAmplified partners' own perspectives on how the initiative contributed to their change efforts also point to important takeaways for grantmakers, especially those that are interested in supporting organizational change:

- 1. Invest in organizations that are already committed to organizational change.** Readiness for change is an essential precondition for effectively advancing a change agenda; it's not something that a funder can easily incentivize an organization to take on if they're not already willing to do so. There are many ways that a funder can assess readiness for change. In the case of ArtsAmplified, the Barr Foundation focused on "known quantity" organizations that had strong leaders, a proclivity for reinvention and risk-taking, and both the willingness and ability to engage in strategic dialogue around change in a changing world. By focusing on organizations with a pre-existing eagerness to invest in change, Barr could focus on supporting their self-determined journeys rather than incentivizing them to make change or guiding them toward a particular destination.
- 2. Give grantees a long runway for change by making multiyear funding commitments from the outset.** Change takes time; the bigger the change, the more time it takes. Multiyear support gives organizations the confidence and security to tackle more substantial organizational change challenges — those that hold the greatest potential to truly transform who they are, how they operate, and what their civic footprint is. As one ArtsAmplified leader put it, "restricted timelines favor tradition." Having a long runway to make change is particularly important when organizations are trying to establish new relationships with communities and community partners; it gives them time and space to invest in building trust and relationships that enable them to engage in deeply community-centered work.

3. Create space for organizations to build community with each other. Organizational change is difficult work. The value of being in community with peers who are also navigating the challenges of change is tremendous. Despite some critiques of the cohort component of ArtsAmplified, all of the grantees cited it as a meaningful, cherished part of their experience with the initiative; nobody suggested that Barr should have convened them less. Gatherings with other organizations can provide essential opportunities for peer mentorship, insight-sharing, and solidarity-building, while also sparking new programmatic partnerships and simply helping leaders and practitioners feel less alone. Organizational change frequently involves leadership succession and/or staff turnover, and a structured community for peer support can be a critical space for new leaders and staff to put their own organizations' challenges and opportunities in a broader context.

4. Pair unrestricted operating support with risk capital to help organizations navigate the dual imperatives of stability and change. Organizations are often operating on multiple time horizons at once, trying to hold their operational, programmatic, and financial ships steady in the short term while also gradually evolving toward a new vision or model over the longer term. Supporting them with multiple types of grants can enable them to make progress on both. Unrestricted operating support provides essential stability and frees up brain space to think about the long term.

Risk capital empowers organizations to make bolder moves for the long term without worrying that they're sacrificing short-term security in the meantime. And the language of "risk capital" helps to secure buy-in from board members and other key stakeholders for efforts that are not a guaranteed success — but which provide essential space for learning and forward movement.

5. Make sure that the purpose of an initiative's theory of change or other conceptual framework, and how you expect it to inform a grantee's work, are clear.

If an initiative comes with a theory of change or conceptual framework, it's natural for grantees to perceive it as a prescription for their own work. If a funder wants the framework to play some other role in informing grantees' efforts or shaping their dialogue with each other, it's important to make that explicit and communicate it frequently. And if the framework has been informed by the grantees, it's also important to state that clearly and consistently.



Photo by Marina Lavitskaya, courtesy The Yard

6. Communicate, communicate, communicate about your future funding plans beyond the end-date of an initiative. Despite a funder's best intentions, it's natural for grantees to grow concerned about the end of an initiative that has provided them with critical funding for multiple years — and the ArtsAmplified experience was no exception to this norm. Despite Barr's efforts to establish ArtsAmplified as a time-limited initiative, some grantees still expressed uncertainty about the possibility of future funding during interviews. It is simply not possible to overcommunicate with grantees about what they can reasonably expect from the funder when the current initiative expires.

7. Consider engaging intermediaries to support ongoing thought-partnership with grantees. Even when a funder is consciously working to counter power dynamics in the funder-grantee relationship, they can still show up. Intermediaries can, therefore, play a critical role in providing grantees with a trusted thought partner with whom they're comfortable sharing first-draft thinking. It's important, however, that the intermediary relationship doesn't replace a deep, authentic relationship between foundation program staff and grantees. Many grantee staff and leaders value knowing and being known by their program officers.

With this in mind, we want to offer three additional takeaways that are relevant to both grantmakers and their intermediaries or other consultant partners:

8. Lead with your humanity. Support can come in many forms, but there's no substitute for making an organization feel genuinely cared for. It's the starting point for any true, honest partnership. (It's also an opportunity to model the kind of human-centered approach that should be at the heart of community engagement efforts, or any effort to build trust across difference.) This may include building relationships with multiple individual staff members at an organization and learning who they are as people, not just as representatives of their organization; engaging with the consequences of change for individuals — both the challenges and the opportunities — as well as what it means for the organization; and demonstrating that you're rooting for a grantee's success, not looking for an opportunity to withhold support from them. For intermediaries, in particular, it also means acting as a genuine thought partner who is invested in each organization's success, a translator who can help organizations better understand the funder's goals and preferences, and an advocate who can help the funder better understand the unique contexts of the organizations.

9. When co-designing an initiative with grantees, be sure that the process flows from the purpose. There are many reasons why a grantmaker and its consultant partners might invite grantees to participate in the act of designing an initiative: to ensure that funding, technical assistance, and reporting requirements address individual grantee needs; to design capacity-building activities that accommodate diverse learning styles, organizational roles, and levels of experience; to create an effective container for a community of practice, peer learning, or collective action. Co-design can ensure that an initiative is genuinely responsive to grantees' needs and goals — but it can also require a lot of additional time and energy on the part of grantees.



Photo courtesy Silkroad

So it's important that the process generates the benefits of co-design without unduly taxing grantees. When the purpose of co-design is to ensure that an initiative addresses individual grant needs or that structured capacity-building activities accommodate a variety of people, it should be sufficient to gather input on an organization-by-organization basis and then design a program or activity that addresses that input. (Though it is critical to communicate clearly and thoroughly with grantees about how the design reflects the input voiced.) ArtsAmplified incorporated this style of co-design, with its consultant partners gathering input from each organization and then making design decisions with Barr in response to that input.

However, there may be times when the purpose of co-design is to create a container for some collective pursuit. In such cases, it is essential that the co-design process is also collective in nature. The organizations or individuals in a nascent collective need to be co-owners in the process of listening to each other's needs and goals, negotiating shared priorities, and designing structures and activities that advance shared priorities. Intermediaries or consultant partners have an important role to play in facilitating these processes. But design and decision-making should happen within the collective, or within some subgroup designated by the collective. Additionally, cultivating a sense of shared identity is an essential first step to structuring a collective-based co-design process. For a nascent collective to effectively engage in shared design and decision-making, participants first need to see themselves as a community. So before a group can begin the actual work of co-design, it's essential to invest in building relationships and social capital within the group. Skilled facilitators can help to create structures and spaces to bring together key stakeholders in the

collective (for instance, executives or other key staff from each organization in the collective) to begin to get to know each other individually, to learn about each other's organizational goals and challenges, and to begin to articulate shared priorities (shared learning goals, for instance, or a shared action agenda). Only then can the group begin to engage in effective collective decision-making around the work that participants will do together.

- 10. Disrupt the binary between “strategic philanthropy” and “trust-based philanthropy” by letting grantees set and pursue their own goals and paths while providing them with conceptual guidance and structured thought partnership.** Strategic philanthropy and trust-based philanthropy are often cast as opposing grantmaking paradigms. The former typically emphasizes grantmaking to organizations whose goals align with a foundation's priorities and holding them accountable to rigorously stated outcomes, while the latter encourages funders to build deep relationships with nonprofit partners and provide flexible support to help them define and achieve their own goals. ArtsAmplified charted a third course that combined elements of both paradigms: It was grounded in a flexible vision and focused on organizations whose own goals aligned with that vision, but it created ample space for the foundation and grantee partners to shape the vision together. Flexible support, extended with few restrictions and an explicit understanding that plans may change, enables organizations to undertake change nimbly and responsively to their own constituents. Offering them a conceptual framework through which to imagine their work and partners with whom they can discuss and refine ideas can give them a genuine sense of being “in” the change work together. This approach can help to mitigate power dynamics too, by putting foundation program staff in a supportive coaching role rather than in a role that requires them to constantly monitor whether grantees have done what they said they would.



Photo by Craig Bailey, courtesy Arts Emerson



Photo by Nile Scott Studios and Maggie Hall, courtesy The American Repertory Theater

Appendix

GRANTEE PARTNER	GROUP INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS	FORMER LEADER INTERVIEWEES
American Repertory Theater	Anna Fitzloff, <i>Managing Director</i> Dayron J. Miles, <i>Associate Artistic Director</i> Diane Paulus, <i>Artistic Director</i> Kathleen Fowkes, <i>Executive Administrator</i> Kelvin Dinkins Jr., <i>Executive Director</i>	Diane Borger, <i>former Executive Producer</i>
ArtsEmerson	Kathy Eow, <i>Associate Director, Institutional Giving</i> Robert Davis Awkward, <i>Company Manager</i> Ronee Penoi, <i>Director of Artistic Programming</i> Shannon Worthington, <i>Associate Vice President of Development</i>	David Dower, <i>former Artistic Director</i> David Howse, <i>former Executive Director</i>
Celebrity Series of Boston	Emily Borababy, <i>Chief Advancement Officer</i> Gary Dunning, <i>President and Executive Director</i> Karen Brown, <i>Chief Operating Officer</i> Nicole Taney, <i>Artistic Director</i> Sara Brookner, <i>Associate Director Institutional Giving and Impact</i>	Amy Lam, <i>former Artistic Director</i>
Global Arts Live	Cathi Ianno, <i>Director of Advancement</i> Connie C. Chin, <i>Executive Director</i> Jennifer Fox, <i>Director of Marketing & Public Relations</i> Maure Aronson, <i>Director of Artistic Programs</i>	
The Greenway Conservancy	Audrey Lopez, <i>Director and Curator of Public Art</i> Christopher Cook, <i>Executive Director</i>	Jesse Brackenbury, <i>former Executive Director</i> Lucas Cowan, <i>former Director and Public Art Curator</i>
GrubStreet	Dariel Suarez, <i>Artistic Director</i> Eson Kim, <i>Director of Faculty & Fellowships</i> Eve Bridburg, <i>Founder and Executive Director</i> Mariona Lloreta, <i>Director of Development and Engagement</i>	
The Huntington	Christopher Mannelli, <i>Executive Director</i> Elisabeth H. Saxe, <i>Chief Development Officer</i> Jennifer Calienes, <i>Institutional Giving Manager</i> Jessica Morrison, <i>Director of Development</i> Loretta Greco, <i>Artistic Director</i>	Michael Maso, <i>former Managing Director</i>
The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston	Jill Medvedow, <i>Ellen Matilda Poss Director</i> John Address, <i>Bill T. Jones Director/Curator of Performing Arts</i> Karin France, <i>Director of Institutional Giving</i>	

continued

GRANTEE PARTNER	GROUP INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS	FORMER LEADER INTERVIEWEES
The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum	Arthurina Fears, <i>Curator of Education</i> Clifford Rust, <i>Chief Financial and Administrative Officer</i> Megan Govin, <i>Senior Manager, Foundation and Government Support</i> Peggy Fogelman, <i>Director</i> Rebecca Ehrhardt, <i>Chief Development Officer</i>	
Jacob's Pillow	A.J. Pietrantone, <i>Deputy Director and Chief Operating Officer</i> Estelle Woodward Arnal, <i>Foundation and Government Relations Director</i> Holly Jones, <i>Producing Director</i> Jared Fine, <i>Chief Marketing Officer</i> Pamela Tatge, <i>Executive and Artistic Director</i>	
MASS MoCA	Elizabeth Smith, <i>Director of Development</i> Kristy Edmunds, <i>Director</i> Tracy Moore, <i>Deputy Director</i>	Joe Thompson, <i>Founding Director</i>
Peabody Essex Museum	Brandy Wolfe, <i>Director of Institutional Giving and Stewardship</i> Danielle Olsen, <i>Director of Programming</i> Kerry Turner, <i>Chief of Staff</i> Kurt Steinberg, Ed.D., <i>Chief Operating Officer</i> Lynda Hartigan, <i>Executive Director and Chief Executive Officer</i> Petra Slinkard, <i>Director of Curatorial Affairs, The Nancy B. Putnam Curator of Fashion and Textiles</i> Sue Kim, <i>Chief Philanthropy Officer</i> Tedi Asher, <i>Neuroscience Researcher</i>	
Silkroad	Alicia Reese, <i>Strategic Partnerships & Social Impact Director</i> Anthony Barbir, <i>Deputy Director</i> Ben Hartley, <i>Executive Officer</i> Jennifer Klahn, <i>Development Director</i>	Eduardo Braniff, <i>former Executive Director</i>
The Theater Offensive	Giselle Byrd, <i>Executive Director</i> Jessica Ernst, <i>Director of Development and Communications/Capital Campaign</i> Matt Gelman, <i>Deputy Director</i>	Harold Steward, <i>former Executive Director</i>
The Yard	Michele Sasso, <i>Board President</i> Stephanie Pacheco, <i>Executive Director</i> Yvonne Mendez, <i>Programming Director</i>	Chloe Jones, <i>former Executive Director</i>



**Barr
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Enabling Bold Change

**Reflections from the eight-year
ArtsAmplified Initiative**