



# GUILD NOTES

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## CREATING EQUITABLE ACCESS FOR DIVERSE POPULATIONS

By Stephanie Golden

Arts education in the U.S. faces a critical situation. According to the NEA's 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, the number of people who have little or no access to arts education is growing rapidly, and amid this general decline, blacks, Hispanic, and low-income people have far fewer arts learning opportunities compared to white people. Community arts education providers are working to address this inequity in different ways, depending on their context and circumstances. For many, the issue of diversity and equal access is a difficult one, and providers do not necessarily agree on the best approaches.

This article presents three different perspectives on achieving equitable access to arts education for diverse groups. Although these views grow out of different contexts, they share some key components:

- Open conversations about the difficult issues of race, ethnicity, and class, both within an organization and with communities it serves.
- Emphasis on long-term community engagement and collaboration, including partnerships with organizations and institutions outside the arts.
- Honoring the cultural knowledge, experience, and perspective of all those being served.

### FLINT INSTITUTE OF MUSIC

Flint Institute of Music (FIM) — comprised of the Flint Symphony Orchestra, Flint School of Performing Arts (FSPA), and Flint Youth Theatre — faced a specific challenge. The institute is located in Flint, MI, a city with a history of racial tension between blacks and whites that continues to influence how FIM is viewed. In this city, which is 57% black, 36% white, 3.5% Hispanic, 3% multi-racial, and 0.5% Asian, the institute sits on a large campus where black residents in particular long felt unwelcome. Moreover, FIM's mission focuses on Western European classical music and dance, often seen as the province of well-to-do white people.

In 1995 FIM began offering tuition-free after-school arts classes at the sites of local community organizations, as well as Head Start programs at its own site, to disadvantaged black children. Some years ago, explains **Davin Pierson Torre**, director of FSPA, the institute developed a process to "transition" students in these outreach programs to classes at FSPA. At parent meetings, interested students and their parents were guided into a new "Super Saturdays" music and dance program held at the school. Super Saturdays provides one year of tuition-free classes, during which families become more comfortable at the school. In meetings with the program coordinator, parents learn how to apply for financial aid so their children can move into regular FSPA classes. The result, says Pierson Torre, has been a considerable increase in the enrollment of these families in the school's tuition-based programs.



Community Music Center, San Francisco, CA

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In response to this success, the orchestra, concerned about its lack of black musicians, began asking how it too could become more diverse. "That's when we got the idea of diversity training," says Pierson Torre. In 2003, they decided to address the issue in a more structured, focused way. With a grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, FIM hired consultants who helped develop a diversity plan, which included creating a diversity committee charged with examining FIM's programs and services to find out which groups were not being served and what the barriers were. The consultants conducted surveys and focus groups to learn community attitudes toward the institute.

One surprise was that "diversity" involved much more than a black-white divide. There were also barriers involving geographic location and age. Perceptions of violent crime in the city made people in the surrounding suburban and rural areas wary of coming to the institute. Additionally, older people did not think the school was for them. "An eighty-six-year-old man and his eighty-three-year-old wife drove here and sat in the parking lot for three Wednesdays in a row before they got the nerve to come in and join our band for adults and seniors," recalls Pierson Torre. "They assumed 'school' means 'kids.'"

The facilitators conducted diversity training for faculty, staff, board, and local community members, in a continuous process over several months. Initially people expressed their views and concerns via anonymous notes. Then, as they felt comfortable and safe, they opened up and were able to talk about matters of race and equity, says Pierson Torre. "The main things," she adds, "is to have representation from people who feel these barriers, have them say what their perceptions are, and be able to listen to them. Faculty members connected to the community enabled us to recruit community members who hadn't realized that they, and their opinions, were welcome." FIM began to earn a reputation of being unafraid to talk about difficult topics.

Part of the process involved "thinking about what we mean by diversity," Pierson Torre explains. People raised questions such as: "Why don't you offer Mariachi band?" "Why don't you have belly dancing classes?" "Why doesn't the symphony play rock music?" FIM does offer programs outside the Western classical tradition (for example, a jazz band and guest artists such as a gospel chorus). However, after emerging from debt in the 1990s, the institute has followed strict criteria for adding new programs in order to remain financially sound. Instead of adding programs that are available elsewhere in Flint (such as belly dancing and mariachi), FIM refers people looking for other styles of music and dance to local organizations that offer them. "Our vision for diversity wasn't to offer programs outside our expertise area, but to make sure anyone remotely interested in our programs would feel welcome," explains Pierson Torre.

Between 2004 and 2012, black enrollment in FIM's tuition-based programs increased from 19% to 30%; urban enrollment increased from 36% to 40%; and suburban enrollment increased from 29% to 31%. Beyond figures, "Our reputation has changed significantly," says Pierson Torre. The entire feeling in the building has been transformed. People from the community "know they're welcome, and they genuinely feel welcome."

## ARTS CORPS

With a mission of directly addressing the disparity in access to high-quality arts education for young people of color, through both arts education and community collaboration, Arts Corps in Seattle applies "a lens of racial justice" to "all areas of [its] work, including curriculum development, assessment, fundraising, classroom management, hiring processes, and pedagogy." Since Arts Corps' students are already quite diverse — from primarily immigrant (Latino, Asian Pacific Islander, and African) and black communities — the organization's diversity initiative focuses on improving programming quality in order to "best meet the needs of the communities where we work," explains Director **Elizabeth Whitford**.

Arts Corps's staff started out entirely white, and staff and teaching artists were majority white until recently. A decision was made to change for several reasons.

- Arts Corps did not want to be working to address inequitable access for youth while perpetuating inequitable access to employment through its own staffing.
- Research has shown that it is important for young people of color to have adults of color in positions of power as role models.
- Having people of color in positions of power helps challenge "the deep legacy of white decision-makers, educators, and policymakers acting like they know what is best for communities of color," says Whitford.
- White people, who constitute the great majority of educators and nonprofit staff, can play a critical role "in challenging patterns of racism and building a powerful learning environment," Whitford adds.

Accordingly, Arts Corps made racial justice the focus of their professional development for about five years. They brought in external trainers "who helped us build a common analysis of our students' experiences in terms of racism and other oppressions," says Whitford. One helpful strategy was to work one-on-one with teaching artists on racial dynamics in the classroom so they could speak candidly about situations they did not know how to handle. For example, some white teaching artist reported feeling ill equipped and uncomfortable when students brought up issues of race among themselves.

To address such challenges, as part of professional development Arts Corps developed a theater curriculum inspired by Augusto Boal's participatory Theater of the Oppressed, with various people taking the teaching artist's role and trying to address the issue. Teaching artists now facilitate conversations about race and income among their students as part of Arts Corps' community-building work. Those with best practices train other faculty and conduct external trainings.

Whitford stresses that it's essential to discuss racial and income inequity with staff and board as well as faculty, so that everyone, especially decision makers, is "aware of the dynamics that perpetuate injustice" and how they themselves might have internalized them. Arts Corps created a social justice committee with members drawn from board, staff, faculty, and youth program alumni. The organization examines staff culture, looking at how pay is distributed, who's promoted, and the subtle ways that power operates in decision making. The goal is to improve practices "and learn to value skill sets that aren't necessarily valued in white middle-class culture," says Whitford.

The staff is now 50 percent people of color. Arts Corps still has “a white-culture way of operating,” Whitford notes, referring to unquestioned norms, behavior standards, and “best practices” that are invisible to whites but “painfully obvious to those whose cultures are suppressed or appropriated” (for more on this concept, see the article “White Supremacy Culture” in Resources). However the organization is now “much clearer about owning where power is, and having decisions be informed by people who know things our white decision makers don’t know,” she explains.

Arts Corps has also diversified fundraising. “To really be embedded in a social justice framework, we need to have financial support from the communities where we work” and build ownership there, says Whitford. Otherwise, decisions are overly influenced by corporate foundations and wealthy individuals. Arts Corps developed Rollathon, a low-cost costume party at a roller rink. Everyone was welcome, and Arts Corps worked to bring in people who were priced out of the regular fundraiser, including youth, families, and artists. People of all income levels attended. “It builds awareness of the need for fundraising and that all levels of support are really valuable,” Whitford says.

Overall, the diversity initiative has not only helped with respect to racial issues but also improved instruction. “We find that teaching artists with a clear racial justice lens generally score higher in our quality assessment,” Whitford notes. She believes that this lens maintains teaching artists’ commitment to critical thinking and community-building across difference; prevents them from giving up on young people; and helps them stand up for the ideal of “a world without oppression.” Teaching artists also become aware of their own power in the classroom to influence the lives of students who are often “penalized or made invisible” by the education system.

## COMMUNITY AND INTENTIONALITY

For **Margie Johnson Reese**, the issue of diversity is straightforward. Reese, is currently vice president for programs at Big Thought in Dallas and has over 30 years of experience in arts education advocacy and management, working throughout the U.S. and internationally. She speaks not of strategies for diversity or best practices but of what she calls the “very simple conversations” we need to have about the question of access. “If you’re hiring someone to tell you how to build a diversity plan,” she says, “you’re wasting your money. There’s no process for thinking in strategic ways other than to stop and think with great determination and *intentionality*. Talk to people in your community and build a conversation the community can sustain and support. It doesn’t take expertise, it takes work and a lot of commitment.”

The key is honoring the population you serve “by understanding the depth of cultures they represent. The word ‘community’ is your guiding word.” Who are you serving? What are their cultural, religious, ethnic backgrounds? Your goal should be to present programs whose staff and resources reflect their perspectives. In Reese’s opinion, “You cannot go to a community that is largely Latino and African American with an all-white staff, using the same materials you’ve used for 30 years. You’ll lose their interest — and you won’t reveal their soul’s potential for expression because they won’t identify with what you’re doing.”

To find diverse staff, Reese advises, do your research. What talents and skills are you looking for, and what are the logical places to find them? If you’ve always recruited candidates from the same organizations, find different ones that can provide the skills you seek.

Remember too that setting an isolated goal to “increase diversity on my staff” won’t work. “If the goal is not organic to your organization, you won’t be successful. If you narrow the conversation too much to race and class, you could hire the wrong person, who doesn’t have the skills you need, just because they’re black,” Reese cautions.

Don’t overlook the human resources in your communities. Look for “elected but also selected leaders”: Girl Scout troop leaders, ministers, retired schoolteachers. “Often they’re a far more valuable resource than bringing someone in from outside who may have good theories.”

The bottom line, for Reese, is this: “Just relax and talk to each other. Who are you? What’s your background, what’s important to you? We shouldn’t be afraid to ask those questions. The conflicts that come up during the conversation are just part of the work. I don’t think those conversations are difficult. I think we have to have the will to have them.”

## RESOURCES

Flint Institute of Music, [www.thefim.org](http://www.thefim.org)

Arts Corps, [www.artscorps.org](http://www.artscorps.org)

National Endowment for the Arts 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, Research Report #49, [www.nea.gov/research/2008-sppa.pdf](http://www.nea.gov/research/2008-sppa.pdf)

Beyond Diversity Resource Center trains people to internalize the ethics and practices of true respect for cultural differences, [www.beyonddiversity.org](http://www.beyonddiversity.org)

Dismantling Racism: A Resource Book for Social Change Groups, Western States Center. Compilation of materials designed to supplement a Dismantling Racism workshop, [www.westernstatescenter.org/tools-and-resources/Tools/Dismantling%20Racism](http://www.westernstatescenter.org/tools-and-resources/Tools/Dismantling%20Racism)

Cultures Connecting, consultant group offering professional development, diversity leadership coaching, and other help in addressing race relations. [www.culturesconnecting.com](http://www.culturesconnecting.com)

Training for Racial Equity & Inclusion: A Guide to Selected Programs, by Ilana Shapiro (The Aspen Institute, 2002). Review and comparison of ten training programs, [www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/rcc/training.pdf](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/sites/default/files/content/docs/rcc/training.pdf)

“White Supremacy Culture,” by Tema Okun. Describes how subtle forms of racism permeate organizations. [www.dismantlingracism.org/Dismantling\\_Racism/liNKs\\_files/whitesupcul09.pdf](http://www.dismantlingracism.org/Dismantling_Racism/liNKs_files/whitesupcul09.pdf)

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