

APAP | MetLife Foundation Case Study
Engaging Underserved Communities

JOHN MICHAEL KOHLER ARTS CENTER

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Take Note

- JMKAC staff work to identify leaders in target communities and invite them to be full participants in sharing the planning, implementation, and evaluation of CONNECTING COMMUNITIES projects.
- Creating work that is in full collaboration with community constituents and specific to issues in the community is at the core of CONNECTING COMMUNITIES programming.
- CONNECTING COMMUNITIES has influenced nearly every other program at the Arts Center, and even its staff structure. Community Partners have collaborated on the creation of new JMKAC programs, such as with the Hmong Mutual Assistance Association leading the development of the Hmong Family Festival, an event featuring Hmong traditions, performances, and art-making activities. To build capacity, new staff members have been added, such as an Americorp volunteer from the Hispanic Information Center serving as a JMKAC family audience specialist to ensure that all of JMKAC's programming is accessible to the Hispanic community.

Overview

JMKAC is an innovative grassroots organization that reaches into the community to involve nontraditional and underserved arts audiences such as cultural minorities, youth at risk, clients of shelters, the elderly, persons with disabilities, industrial employees, as well as the general public. JMKAC and five Community Partners have also developed CONNECTING COMMUNITIES. Begun as a single project, it quickly became an ongoing initiative bringing together superb artists with targeted constituencies who have had little access to the arts in order to collaborate on major original works and, in doing so, unite and strengthen the region. Commissions have involved visual, performing, media, and literary artists.

The overarching goals of CONNECTING COMMUNITIES collaborations are to:

- 1) make contemporary art forms accessible to underserved constituencies by involving them as collaborators with superb artists in the creation of powerful new works;
- 2) impact the lives of individual CONNECTING COMMUNITIES participants;
- 3) strengthen the community;
- 4) provide artists with opportunities to develop significant community-based works that impact their careers and lives; and
- 5) build new audiences for JMKAC; and 6) develop models of artistic collaboration to share with the field.

Commitment

Strategic Concepts

The partners and underserved populations are involved in all aspects of the CONNECTING COMMUNITIES program from concept to realization.

Leadership in the Community

The program has come to be seen by the field as a model for uniting and strengthening constituencies within the broader community.

Effective Practices

Community Engagement

JMKAC works with sixteen community partners including social service agencies, cultural groups, schools, senior centers, and unions. The partners' responsibilities are to attend regularly scheduled meetings; host or attend additional planning and brainstorming meetings to involve their constituents in projects; inform JMKAC of current issues, projects, or events of each partner organization to assist in

planning future CONNECTING COMMUNITIES projects; encourage constituents to participate; assist JMKAC in reducing barriers for its constituents to participate in or experience the arts; and provide JMKAC with letters of support for grant opportunities.

In addition, JMKAC staff work to identify leaders in target communities and invite them to be full participants in sharing the planning, implementation, and evaluation of CONNECTING COMMUNITIES projects.

Implementation

Planning often begins as much as 2 ½ to 3 years in advance of the project. The Center describes the planning and implementation process as “organic” and flexible to accommodate the needs and ideas of the artists, Community Partners, and participants.

- JMKAC staff work to identify leaders in target communities and invite them to be full participants in sharing the planning, implementation, and evaluation of CONNECTING COMMUNITIES projects.
- CONNECTING COMMUNITIES artists are selected—with input from Community Partners— not only for the quality of their work but for their capacity to facilitate and engage community members in a collaborative process.
- CONNECTING COMMUNITIES artists generally visit JMKAC and the community months in advance of their residency project to meet with Community Partners to begin establishing a rapport and sense of trust.
- The artists help generate excitement and word-of-mouth promotion about the upcoming residency by going out into the community to meet potential participants.
- JMKAC staff print postcards and posters and announce a public Call for Participation throughout the community.

Evaluation

Comments are recorded throughout the project, participants are formally surveyed, and Community Partners are invited to be part of in-depth evaluations after the project’s completion. Evaluation feedback, both from participants and from the artists, is used to refine future projects and set new goals in reaching underserved constituencies.

Challenges

Partners recognized that there might be some hesitation for their constituents to come to JMKAC to register their interest in being involved in some programming. This challenge was overcome by

providing constituents with the opportunity to register at Partner organizations and by holding events in the community to introduce the idea to constituents.

Advice

Working with qualified partner agencies, implementing participant feedback, and engaging target populations in their communities will lead to increased participation.



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