

Minnesota State Arts Board

Public Input about FY23 Grant Programs: Findings from Listening Sessions

The Minnesota State Arts Board (Arts Board) stimulates and encourages the creation, performance, and appreciation of the arts in Minnesota. The Arts Board is a Minnesota state agency, supported by taxpayer funding from the State of Minnesota's general fund and the arts and cultural heritage fund, and from the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 2020, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Arts Board restructured a large majority of its grant programs to provide flexible creative support to arts organizations and individual artists (through the Creative Support for Organizations grant program and the Creative Support for Individuals grant program). Now, the Arts Board is considering which grant programs to offer in its next fiscal year, and wanted public input to help inform these decisions.

The Arts Board contracted with Wilder Research (Wilder) to design and implement a number of public input strategies, including a general survey, a survey of previous grantees and applicants, and 15 listening sessions with residents from across Minnesota. Listening sessions are a qualitative data collection method, similar to focus groups or interviews, but they differ from focus groups and interviews in that they are often less directed and as a result allow participants to speak freely about their ideas, perceptions, and experiences in response to a question or topic. In these listening sessions, for example, we provided participants with information about barriers to arts participation and then asked them broadly about barriers they have experienced to participating in arts and culture activities.

Throughout August and early September 2021, in consultation with the Arts Board, Wilder developed a listening session protocol intended for anyone residing in Minnesota. From late September to mid-October, Wilder managed the listening sessions, including scheduling, facilitating, and transcribing verbatim notes. The Arts Board recruited participants for the listening sessions from their general email list and in coordination with Minnesota's 11 regional arts councils. In total, 158 Minnesotans attended one of the 15 listening sessions. Wilder analyzed verbatim transcripts from the listening sessions using a thematic coding process, which resulted in the findings presented in this report.

About the listening sessions

In total, 158 Minnesotans participated in one of the 15 listening sessions. Wilder hosted at least one listening session intended for each of Minnesota’s 11 regions. Based on population size, we hosted two listening sessions with four of Minnesota’s regions: Region 3, Region 7W, Region 10, and Region 11. The recruitment approach for these listening sessions prioritized geographic diversity among participants. We did not recruit participants based on other demographic or identity characteristics, such as race, age, income level, and so on—nor did we collect this information from participants. Consequently, the findings presented in this report may not adequately capture the full range of perceptions and experiences of Minnesotans by particular demographic characteristics other than geography. See Figure 1 for the number of participants per region who participated in a listening session.

1. Number of listening session participants from each region

Region	# of participants (N=158)
Region 1 ^a	--
Region 2	2
Region 3 (two sessions)	24
Region 4	14
Region 5	8
Regions 6&8	7
Region 7E	4
Region 7W (two sessions)	25
Region 9	7
Region 10 (two sessions)	22
Region 11 (two sessions)	45

^a Due to low registration numbers for listening sessions scheduled with Region 1 and Region 2 residents, we opened both listening sessions to anyone residing in Region 1 or Region 2; two residents from Region 2 attended either session.

In listening sessions, we welcomed participants and then Sue Gens, executive director of the Arts Board, provided a brief overview of why the Arts Board partnered with Wilder to host the sessions. Sue left each listening session after these introductory remarks. Wilder then provided a brief overview of key findings from the general survey we recently did with the Arts Board (see: *Public Input about FY23 Grant Programs: General Survey Findings*). After the survey presentation, we invited participants to share their ideas and experiences in response to two questions:

1. In the next 1-2 years, what types of arts and culture events or opportunities do you think will be most desired or needed in your community? Why do you think these types of events or opportunities will be most desired or needed?

2. What are the barriers or challenges that you have experienced in regards to your arts and culture participation? Which of these barriers and challenges do you expect to still be experiencing in the next 1-2 years?

After hosting the 15 listening sessions and transcribing verbatim notes from their audio recordings, we systematically labeled and organized the resulting data through thematic coding. First, we developed a standardized thematic codebook with which to code each of the 66 transcripts.¹ Prior to beginning coding, the four-person coding team completed an inter-coder reliability exercise that prompted the team to develop a mutual understanding of the codes and how they should be used. The team then met regularly during the coding process to talk through any questions related to coding and to ensure that all team members were using the codes consistently.

Once we finished coding, we identified meaningful relationships between codes based on the number of times that codes “co-occurred” with each other—that is, whenever two or more codes were used to label the same portion of data. These “co-occurrences” indicated that these codes should be considered connected for interpretation and reporting purposes, rather than as discrete codes. Consequently, we grouped co-occurring codes together to form the majority of the themes reported below; these themes include: barriers related to not having enough time or money, offerings that focus on cross-cultural bridging, barriers related to COVID-19, and offerings that acknowledge the specific needs of greater Minnesotan communities. Additionally, one code was used frequently during coding but did not meaningfully co-occur with other codes. We included this code as a theme as well—travel-related barriers.

Listening session findings

Our analysis identified five major themes from the listening sessions. Two of these themes speak to the types of arts and culture offerings that participants said their communities wanted or needed in the next 1-2 years:

- Offerings (programs, events, activities) that focus on cross-cultural bridging
- Offerings that acknowledge the specific needs of greater Minnesota communities

¹ If a listening session had four or more people, we split the participants into breakout rooms twice during the session—one breakout room for either question. Wilder staff facilitated conversations in breakout rooms as well as audio recorded each breakout room for transcription purposes. Some Wilder staff recorded their two breakout rooms as two separate audio files; other Wilder staff recorded them as one combined audio file. In listening sessions with less than four people, we did not split participants into breakout rooms. Rather, we facilitated and audio recorded the discussion among all participants in the main virtual meeting room. This responsive approach to facilitating and audio recording the listening sessions resulted in 66 total transcripts of participants’ ideas, perceptions, and experiences in response to the two questions above.

The remaining three themes represent common barriers to arts and culture participation and creation as noted by participants, especially barriers they expect to still be experiencing in the next 1-2 years:

- Barriers related to not having enough money or time to create or participate in arts and culture opportunities
- Barriers related to COVID-19 worries and precautions
- Travel-related barriers

Offerings (programs, events, activities) that focus on cross-cultural bridging

Residents across Minnesota said that their communities wanted or needed arts and culture offerings that focus on cross-cultural bridging—that is, programs, events, or activities that help people connect across cultures and learn about cultures that are not their own.

Many participants spoke of their desire to use the arts as a tool for relationship-building between the dominant White cultural group in their communities and non-dominant cultural groups that are part of their communities, such as Native American communities, Latino communities, Southeast Asian communities, and East African communities. These participants suggested that the Arts Board create grant programs that seek to build cross-cultural relationships and facilitate cross-cultural learning.

An example would be [a local powwow]. I've been coordinating that for 20-some years now. It's mind-blowing that there are so many White folk that are local who didn't even know that they were welcome or able to attend the powwow. They thought it was only for Indian folk, okay? So there's a lot of misinformation out there, misinterpretation. ... They've never dealt with that kind of culture at all. It's amazing the appreciation that I get [when I bring White people to the powwow]. The information that I hear is they want more of this. They want it to keep happening. They go, 'This is great, keep continuing this.'

—Listening session participant

[We did] two very different surveys with our audience at an outdoor music event. ... One that was about demographic data. The other one was about how we're launching this sewing program for Somali women, so one of the questions was about the connections people have to the Somali community? What the surveys told us was we were serving a majority White audience and the thing they most wanted was programming about communities of color or by communities of color—and that this very same audience had zero connections to communities of color.

—Listening session participant

Some participants spoke of the challenges that non-dominant cultural groups faced in their communities—such as interpersonal and cultural racism (for example, explicitly racist remarks or feeling excluded from majority White gatherings) and structural racism (for example, the types of arts and culture offerings that typically receive funding)—and suggested that the Arts Board

create grant programs that address these challenges or otherwise provide support for non-dominant cultural groups in Minnesota to share, practice, and celebrate their culture and heritage.

If art is what we use to unite us and help us find common ground, I think in any place really in the U.S., but especially in rural places, cultural understanding is really needed. There's just so much insidious racism that people don't even understand is racism. I go over this with my family constantly. It's not that I want education, but cultural programming where people feel welcome to come, people feel like they're part of the community being there.

—Listening session participant

The festival we just had was celebrating a mural exhibit, but we also had vaccines on site, people who were starting businesses, economic empowerment programs, mental health services. What we found is that people are hesitant to fund this kind of thing because they say, 'Well, it's not really an arts event. Yes, art is there, but really it's a Latino event—so we're not going to fund you because we are not considering that art—or,' [they say,] 'It's in a public space, so that's not really art. It's like graffiti and things like that.'

—Listening session participant

Offerings that acknowledge the specific needs of greater Minnesota communities

In listening sessions with residents of greater Minnesota, many participants noted that the arts and culture needs and desires of their communities are different from those in the Twin Cities metro. As one participant said, “I have worked in greater Minnesota for the last 11 years, but I live in the Twin Cities—and they're very different worlds.”

A prominent barrier mentioned by numerous participants is the perception among greater Minnesota residents and Twin Cities residents that artists living in greater Minnesota are not as skilled or talented as artists living the Twin Cities. A few participants suggested that the Arts Board could help address this barrier by continuing to prioritize funding for greater Minnesota applicants as well as supporting artists from the Twin Cities and greater Minnesota to connect with each other and create or produce arts and culture opportunities together.

[We need] to get a message out that our artistic quality is not restricted to major metropolitan areas. ... Years ago, I asked our audience if they would be more or less likely to see a play that was a world premiere at our theater. Overwhelmingly, they said 'less likely' because [they said,] 'If a play is having a world premiere in a rural community, it must not be very good. Good plays premier in better [bigger] cities.'

—Listening session participant

I moved from Minneapolis four years ago but I grew up very rural, and there's such a regional belief system that if you're not in a metropolitan area, you're not a serious artist—or if you're a serious artist living in a rural area, you can't be very good at what you're doing, and you certainly can't make a living doing it.

—Listening session participant

I would like to see more exchange between all artists throughout the state. There seems to be the Twin Cities artists and people advocating for them—and then there's rural arts. There could be people going back and forth or we could foster more people going back and forth and having more interchange with exhibitions, residencies, discussions.

—Listening session participant

Many greater Minnesota participants also said that making and presenting art during COVID-19 remains a challenge, with some participants saying that they have decided against in-person work for the foreseeable future even though this will negatively impact the sustainability of their work and the relationships they have with their community. A few greater Minnesota participants mentioned that artists and arts organizations in their communities were not able to pivot as readily in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as compared to their observations of how Twin Cities-based artists and arts organizations have pivoted. Some of these participants suggested that the Arts Board support the arts in greater Minnesota by focusing on building the capacity of artists and arts organizations to continue their work safely while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact their communities.

I don't have infrastructure to monitor and manage guests who come to check vaccine status or even to require all of my collaborative partners to make sure that their constituents are vaccinated. We went out on a limb and required proof of vaccination and we lost members because of that. We had people who said they were vaccinated and lied. Then when I finally said, 'You have to have proof,' they were gone. We have some really, really strongly held and opposing views. What I'm dealing with is just trying to keep people engaged in the arts because I believe it's essential for their humanity and their connection to community. ... I am so over my eyeballs in dealing with the emotional mess of COVID; I'm just trying to keep people involved in the arts so that we can present it in some form or other.

—Listening session participant

Barriers related to not having enough money or time to create or participate in arts and culture opportunities

In all listening sessions, many participants said that they and their communities lacked the money or time to create or participate in arts and culture opportunities. Numerous participants talked about the need for free or low-cost offerings so that cost is not a barrier for people in their community to experience art. Numerous participants also talked about needing more funding to make and produce arts and culture experiences for their communities, and that their financial situation has been negatively impacted by COVID-19. Relatedly, a few participants mentioned that they struggle with finding the “right price” for their offerings, saying that if they charge too little their community assumes the offering is low quality and if they charge too much they risk pricing out community members who may otherwise attend.

We have found that it's imperative to offer low-cost or free opportunities for our constituents here in our region.

—Listening session participant

There are lots of organizations that are struggling financially right now, even with being able to open up again and provide some level of programming over the last six months. Audience numbers are down due to restrictions on attendance and the buildings not being able to run at 100% capacity—needing to run at 50% over the last several months. That reduced attendance reduces tickets sales—so your production costs are generally the same, but you don't have the same revenue coming in when you're selling tickets.

—Listening session participant

There is that whole issue of paying and not paying. We've learned some crazy lessons about that, too. Sometimes we've had world music events here, which we've been lucky enough to offer for free and they're fabulous shows—but we can't get anybody to show up! It's almost like, 'Well, if they're free, they can't be that great.' It took us a long time to figure that out, and now we're getting audiences and growing them. We've had to explain in the marketing that it's free because it's funded by a grant. It's that whole mindset of, 'If it doesn't cost something, it can't be that great. Why would I go?'

—Listening session participant

The variety of funding sources we have has dwindled or dried up. I know the Arts Board has been there and has been funding through the last 18 months, but a lot of other businesses and a lot of other organizations that provided grant funding that helped support the programming have dried up or have been greatly diminished. ... It's very challenging right now to continue to present the programming at the levels that we were pre-COVID without all these funding sources to create art.

—Listening session participant

Many participants also talked about the need for artists and arts organizations to increase the number of ways and formats in which people experience their work, such as by offering shorter experiences or experiences that are responsive to their community members' busy schedules and lives. Numerous participants elevated families with young children as a key example of a mismatch between the duration of many arts and culture offerings and the length of time that a family can feasibly spend at such an offering. Some participants also mentioned that offering hybrid events, or continuing to offer fully virtual events, might best serve families with young children as well as other arts and culture supporters in Minnesota with busy schedules or concerns about attending in-person events. These participants suggested that the Arts Board consider creating grant programs that increase the capacity of artists and arts organizations to offer hybrid events (with virtual and in-person options) or to solely offer more virtual events.

We have learned something about the effectiveness of online programming and the fact that, among people who can't attend in-person for whatever reason, there's been a lot of gratitude for putting things out online. That's an additional piece that the Arts Board should be thinking about as a valid way of sharing arts experiences.

—Listening session participant

If I want to go see a Minnesota Orchestra concert, they don't start until eight o'clock. I have two kids at home, and hiring a babysitter is really expensive these days. For some of the Minnesota Orchestra programs, their tickets are \$100 apiece. You're talking like hundreds of dollars to go out for an evening of music, and it's just not really affordable or attainable for our family to do that. So I think as an art supporter, it's better for me just to throw my donation at them and take advantage of what they're putting up online than it is to go in person.

—Listening session participant

We found this year because we were performing outdoors that we had a lot of families that would just be strolling through the park and they would stop and they would watch the performance for about 20 minutes and then they'd move on. The commitment to a two-hour performance is somewhat hard because people don't know how their children are going to respond. We haven't, in the theater industry, really found a good solution to that. ... We're trying to find ways through that barrier so that families can participate and can feel comfortable adjusting their activity based on the behavior of their children. For example, we've never explored a comeback ticket. You saw the first 20 minutes, now you can come back in three days and see the next 20 minutes.

—Listening session participant

In addition, numerous participants talked about their lack of knowledge and confidence with marketing and advertising as a barrier to creating and presenting their work, and, importantly, that they often do not have the time or resources to effectively market and advertise their work. Some participants suggested that the Arts Board create grant programs that support this aspect of the creative sector or otherwise provide guidance about how to best market and advertise arts and culture opportunities, especially because COVID-19 has resulted in many artists and arts organizations less frequently connecting with their audience or community; it may take extra work to build audiences moving forward.

I think it's hard to know how to reach some people [to inform them about arts and culture opportunities] because they aren't online, they don't read the newspaper, and then they'll say, 'Oh, I didn't know that was coming up,' and then they'll have missed it.

—Listening session participant

Something we've struggled with is marketing efforts. Small nonprofit organizations don't necessarily have that talent in-house nor can we afford to hire necessarily. Is there a way that the Arts Board can support smaller organizations by hooking them up to people who would create and execute a marketing plan?

—Listening session participant

The advertising costs are prohibitive for most groups and it's hard to know where to spend your money. Should you spend it on the local radio stations? Should you send it down to the Twin Cities and try to bring people up from the Twin Cities? Or should you do it in print, or through Explore Minnesota? It's very, very expensive and we really don't know where the best bang for your buck is on advertising.

—Listening session participant

It's going to take a lot to motivate people to get out again. ... It's going to take a lot of effort, a lot of advertising, a lot of ingenuity to engage that audience again. For small arts organizations, the effort to reengage your audience is going to take years.

—Listening session participant

Some participants mentioned that building relationships among Arts Board grantees and applicants might be a useful way of helping to address some of these barriers related to capacity (lack of time, money, etc.). In particular, these participants noted that sharing skills or time among multiple individuals and organizations could help with the “capacity gap” mentioned by many participants—and that perhaps the Arts Board could facilitate or support this type of exchange among its applicants and grantees. Relatedly, another participant mentioned that the Arts Board could create a catalogue of various models of creating and presenting work. For example, if the Arts Board sponsored the creation and cataloguing of a model for doing programming with

young children, then individuals and organizations could more readily begin offering child-focused programming to meet their community's needs.

Skill shares, capacity building shares. If you need help with marketing, for example, can there be a work exchange program? —Listening session participant

If there were help with some of the administrative things or the marketing that we could share in a region, those resources could assist smaller organizations to have effective market strategies. I think that would be great. —Listening session participant

Maybe building a model or two and then disseminating that information to all kinds of communities as best as we could—just to give people an idea or an example of what could happen. I know someone who is starting a program for children. When they build that, it will be a model. I'm thinking maybe the Arts Board could pick a couple of different kinds of communities and explore with them what they might need that's related to the arts—directly or indirectly—and help them with how to create that. —Listening session participant

Is the role of the Minnesota State Arts Board to be a capacity builder or to connect with other capacity building initiatives? There are several that exist in the Twin Cities and in greater Minnesota. I wonder if there's an opportunity for more collaboration or partnership with nonprofits or local municipalities [around capacity building]. —Listening session participant

Barriers related to COVID-19 worries and precautions

In listening sessions with residents across Minnesota, many participants noted barriers to arts and culture activities stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous participants mentioned that the biggest barriers for them are the unknowns about how the pandemic will evolve and how it will affect their work in the next 1-2 years.

All the uncertainties around COVID are a huge barrier. It seems like, as an artist and as an arts organization, from one day to the next, we're like, 'Do we do it in person? Do we do it in Zoom? Can we do this, can we not?' As soon as we get geared back up to do something in person, then the COVID numbers are just growing exponentially. There's nothing the Arts Board can do about that. —Listening session participant

Numerous participants mentioned that they want support or guidance related to connecting with their audiences and communities safely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of these participants mentioned needing advice on how to create protocols for indoor arts and culture opportunities while others said that they needed advice on how to go about hosting outdoor opportunities. Other participants mentioned that there are groups of people, such as older adults or people with disabilities or health conditions, who may be less comfortable participating in in-person arts and culture events, whether indoors or outside. These participants suggested that the Arts Board create grant programs that bring arts and culture experiences safely to vulnerable groups.

We're all eager to return to theaters, but what does that look like when we continue to have different variants. How do we return to theaters safely and stay in them, and create those opportunities for people to not only perform, but go watch theater in person? What do those protocols look like?

–Listening session participant

We need support for outdoor venues and events. Many arts organizations are trying to adapt to the pandemic by providing outdoor events, yet they are not fully equipped to operate events outdoors. For example, what are the guidelines for restroom facilities, for sound and lighting for outdoor events? How hot does it have to be to cancel an outdoor event?

–Listening session participant

Certainly there are difficulties with people who are elderly and people who are handicapped having access [to arts and culture opportunities]. I don't know that organizations aren't reaching out to those groups, but I don't know that they are either. I think that would be helpful. My community is older and I think we have an audience that would appreciate the work, but they just don't have access.

–Listening session participant

Travel-related barriers

Travel-related barriers to arts and culture participation were mentioned by both greater Minnesota residents and Twin Cities metro residents, but the issues and suggestions for addressing them differed somewhat by geography. Among greater Minnesota listening session participants, travel-related barriers most often referred to needing to travel at minimum 15-20 miles to participate in arts and culture offerings and the difficulties people experience traveling to in-person events because of this. Twin Cities metro participants, on the other hand, more often talked about the need for offering arts and culture events near public transit stops or other locations that are readily accessible to people in their community.

The barrier I really want to talk about is transportation. Even if we have a free class, it still may be incredibly difficult for youth or even elders to get to our building.

–Listening session participant

Transportation is a huge issue. It takes a lot to just get somebody that's got to drive 15 or 20 minutes or a half an hour to go to do something or to see something. Maybe they really want to do it but it's just getting that motivation to [travel to] it.

–Listening session participant

When we did meetings or classes virtually outside of the gallery, we had problems with getting materials to people. They didn't have all the materials they needed. We had to have them come in and get it—and those kinds of things make a difference when you live 40 miles from the town. So that all plays a role in making things accessible to folks that live out in the woods.

–Listening session participant

We're technically in town, but we're out on the levy road. The only thing next to us is the port, which is busy with truck traffic. You can ride a bike on the road, but we do not recommend it because some of those trucks go really fast down that road. We're not on any bus route and the cab transportation system is horrible to say the least. One of the cab companies doesn't even answer their phone. Another one will be rude to you and not pick you up unless they know who you are. Lyft is not always on. There's a dial-a-ride system, which we've actually bought tokens for, but people have to reserve that 24 hours in advance.

–Listening session participant

Summary

The 15 listening sessions elevated the types of arts and culture offerings that participants said were desired or needed by their communities as well as the barriers that they faced in their arts and culture participation. In particular, listening session participants said that offerings that focus on cross-cultural bridging are desired or needed by their communities. This was true regardless of their region of residence. Similarly, the large majority of respondents to the general survey and the grantee and applicant survey indicated that “programs or events that share or teach about people’s culture” were strongly desired or needed by their communities.

In addition, many listening session participants who live in greater Minnesota suggested that the Arts Board create programs that respond to the specific needs of their communities, or at minimum create grant programs that are generalized enough to work well in the Twin Cities metro and in greater Minnesota. These participants perceived that they experience more difficulties than their Twin Cities counterparts in connecting with audiences, sustaining and growing resources for creative work, and knowing the most effective ways to advertise and market their work.

Lastly, some participants suggested that the Arts Board support capacity building and resource sharing among artists and culture workers across Minnesota, particularly as it relates to the business aspects of their work, such as pricing, advertising, and grant writing. For example, the Arts Board could support capacity building efforts by helping to centralize resources related to the business aspects of arts and culture work as well as support resource sharing efforts by helping to connect artists and culture workers for the purposes of sharing their skills and knowledge with each other.

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For more information

This report presents findings from the *Minnesota State Arts Board: Public input about FY23 grant programs* study.

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