

Engaging With Your Community

In its simplest form, community engagement is the practice of working collaboratively with groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people.

This approach is a great place to start as you begin to dig deeper to better connect with your local community stakeholders. This guide will support you through intentional and actionable steps to build powerful community advocates, have engaging conversations, and create sustainable relationships that will last beyond AEP6.

Arts & Economic Prosperity 6

Arts & Economic Prosperity 6 (AEP6) is an economic impact study of the nation's nonprofit arts and culture industry. It is the largest and most inclusive study of its kind ever conducted, with a specific focus on 387 participating communities from across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia.

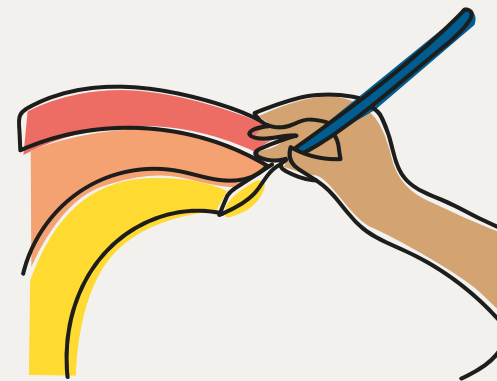
In 2017, AEP5 documented that the nonprofit arts industry generated \$166.3 billion in economic activity (spending by organizations plus the event-related spending by their audiences) which supported 4.6 million jobs and generated \$27.5 billion in government revenue. AEP demonstrates that an investment in the arts provides both cultural and economic benefits to the community.

For the first time, the AEP6 study includes the requirement that our partners collect a portion of audience-intercept surveys from attendees at events hosted by arts and culture organizations that primarily serve communities of color.

For example, this would include organizations that have a primary mission statement that is centered on advancing, creating, and/or preserving artistic and cultural traditions rooted in communities of color—BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and ALAANA (African, Latinx, Asian, Arab, Native American).

Benefits of a Vibrant Arts & Culture Community

- Nonprofit arts and culture organizations are businesses. They employ people locally, purchase goods and services from within the community, are members of their chambers of commerce, and attract tourists to their regions.
- The arts drive commerce to local businesses. The arts, unlike most industries, leverage significant amounts of event-related spending by their audiences. In 2017, arts attendees spent \$31.47 per person, per event, beyond the cost of admission on items such as meals, parking, and lodging—vital income for local businesses.
- Arts travelers are ideal tourists. They stay longer and spend more to seek out authentic cultural experiences. One-third of attendees travel from outside the county in which the activity takes place and spend an average of \$48 per person (69% say they traveled specifically to attend the arts activity).
- In 2017, the combined \$5 billion in direct arts funding by local, state, and federal governments yielded \$27.5 billion in government revenue.



Next Steps to Follow

Be clear

Before developing a relationship with BIPOC/ALAANA communities, BE CLEAR about the mission and the value of participating in AEP6 for the community you are engaging. It's not enough to practice an elevator pitch; you need to communicate your role in the mission and why it's crucial for you and your organization to be a part of it. Be prepared to discuss the project, goals, intended barriers, outcomes, benefits, and multiple points of interest and engagement.

Define your methods of engagement

There are many ways to engage community organizations, and efforts shouldn't be limited to just one. For example:

- If you are familiar with your local BIPOC/ALAANA organizations, consider sending a direct communication highlighting that AEP6 is centered in equity and inclusion and your need for their participation to help collect this data to establish local and national benchmarks for BIPOC/ALAANA arts and culture organizations.
 - Consider additional forms of engagement: targeted/dedicated webinars, emails, and blogs with a direct invite to BIPOC/ALAANA organizations to learn more about AEP6 and the data collection effort.
 - Double up. Add to existing communications like weekly emails, blogs, and newsletters.
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Seek knowledge

Seek knowledge about the community—it's essential to learn all aspects of your community culture. Seeking knowledge allows you to engage community organizations, artists, activists, and leaders authentically while also being a key business imperative for the continued growth and success of the community partnership. Make sure some of the following are critical elements of your research:

- Overall Culture (language, traditional practices, holidays, festivals, etc.)
- Social Networks
- Values
- Politics, Economic Conditions, and History
- Community Trends
- Current Experiences and Voices

Doing this will also identify groups that may need more or less support, that are easier to engage, and those who may become extensions and champions of the work you're doing with AEP6.

Tap existing networks

Partners can help share the workload and join you as champions to help support participation in AEP6. Be sure to also tap into existing networks to spread the word, leveraging existing partners and champions. Find those community leaders whose strengths and networks complement AEP6 data collection efforts for broader reach and more profound relevance.

Create new partnerships

Identify organizational partners who can amplify your effort—for example, a school or university, church or social service organization, and/or chamber of commerce with ties to BIPOC/ALAANA communities. In addition, look to leaders in the arts and culture community who have a particular resource or expertise within the BIPOC/ALAANA arts and culture community. Be sure there is a mutual understanding of their roles, commitments, and requirements for all partners as you move forward. And remember, this doesn't need to be a short-term partnership; long-term impact is a partnership that will continue to grow and evolve.

Communicate

Communication can make or break any community engagement effort. Take time to think strategically about your communication. Understand what you want to communicate and then develop a clear message. Decide who should carry that message (the CEO or executive director? a grassroots leader? an elected official? a business leader? or someone completely unexpected?). Plan the timing of your communication to align with key steps in your engagement process so that your message doesn't get too far ahead of—or behind—your AEP6 effort.

Be thoughtful

Make it easy for BIPOC/ALAANA community organizations to engage with AEP6. Be thoughtful about the location of meetings and events. Be deliberate in selecting informational meeting locations for outreach surrounding AEP6. That may mean hosting an informational meeting at a BIPOC/ALAANA arts and culture venue and choosing a time of day that accommodates non-traditional schedules.

Address potential language barriers

Americans for the Arts can provide AEP6 survey materials in multiple languages that may be better suited for some BIPOC/ALAANA arts and culture organizations. Please be sure to share that messaging in your outreach efforts. Also, be aware of technical jargon and acronyms in communications. Finally, everyone doesn't have the same shared vernacular. Be sure to ask if you don't understand the reference.

Practice service

Ensure your team's manner and outreach efforts reflect inclusiveness, respect, transparency, and active listening. Be responsive, available, and consistent for questions and needs throughout and beyond AEP6. The culture of service work doesn't need to end when the project ends.

Manage expectations

Manage expectations by being upfront and honest. Let participants know all the "non-negotiable" in your early conversations. Be transparent in describing what is required for AEP6 data collection. And if your organization has the resources, offer ways in which you can help alleviate any barriers, capacity issues, or limitations.

Provide resources

As you continue to advocate for AEP6 and your organization's work in the community, now is a great time to assess the resources you have at your disposal. What have you learned is important but missing? What do you need? What does your community need? Once you've collected data on your needs, start outreach to fill in the gaps. As you manage the resources you need, think outside the box. Resources can come in various forms, including but not limited to: print and digital toolkits, industry guidelines, webinars, other local organizations, and don't forget stories and shared experiences from members of your community.

