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“Striving Toward Equity.” How a New Funding Initiative Reimagines Support for Disabled Artists

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DCLI PARTICIPANT REVECA TORRES (SEATED IN WHEELCHAIR). PHOTO: ELIZABETH

In [a piece](#) on the Pop Culture Collaborative’s blog, cultural producer Claudia Alick argued last fall that “disabled artists have not received funding on the same levels as abled artists and institutions.”

This statement doesn’t quite track with arts funders’ professed commitments to boosting inclusion and equity. How could supporting disabled artists not be a huge component of any equity-minded grantmaker’s strategy?

A month later, a representative from the largest and most influential arts funder of them all agreed with Alick’s take. “Institutional structures have not served disabled artists in the past,” said Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Program Director Emil Kang [while announcing the Disability Futures Fellows](#), a national award created in partnership with the Ford Foundation.

None of this comes as a huge surprise to the Chicago-based grantmaker 3Arts, which is emerging as a forceful advocate for disabled artists. Six years ago, the organization partnered with the University of Illinois at Chicago’s “Bodies of Work,” a network that showcases the disability experience, to establish the 3Arts Residency Fellowship. The goal? Build audiences for disability art and strengthen the professional pipeline.

3Arts recently announced the next phase of its work to elevate disabled artists. Launched with seed funding from the Joyce Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, the [Disability Culture Leadership Initiative \(DCLI\)](#) will document the

experiences of fellowship alumni, advocate for the artistic and economic mobility of deaf and disabled artists, and “highlight the potential for disability aesthetics to expand and enrich every artistic discipline.”

While 3Arts acknowledges the crucial importance of things like compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), this initiative centers the unmet needs of disabled artists themselves. “While there is certainly movement in increasing accessibility services for audiences, especially in larger venues that have the resources to make that happen, there is less advancement in terms of direct funding, professional development pipelines and training programs,” said 3Arts’ Executive Director Esther Grimm.

Grimm hopes other funders will step up to move the field forward. “If disability, which is an intersectional identity, is left out of the conversation and work around equity, it will remain sidelined in general.”

Explaining the gap

Last September, IP’s Julia Travers looked at the [Disability Inclusion Fund \(DIF\)](#), a new \$10 million, five-year funding collaborative housed at Borealis Philanthropy. The Ford Foundation co-created the fund, and its work aligns with Ford President Darren Walker’s 2018 effort to make the foundation’s grantmaking and operations fully inclusive of people with disabilities.

Travers cited an August 2020 Foundation Center search finding that grants serving people with disabilities between 2008 and 2018 totaled about \$22

billion, or about 3.5% of the \$623 billion foundations gave out in that timeframe. If the search is altered from populations served to funding subject areas that explicitly prioritize people with disabilities, the percentage is lower—about \$4.7 billion in total, or 0.75% of foundation grants. The data suggests that arts grantmakers’ lack of support for disabled artists reflects trends across the funding ecosystem.

I asked Grimm why she thinks arts funders haven’t been more responsive to this community. “I do know that many funders have traditionally prioritized audiences and reach—the [number of people ‘served’](#)—as opposed to equitable practices regarding the artists who are hired to perform and present,” she said. “Of those arts funders, few support capital improvements, so adding elevators, retrofitting spaces in pre-ADA compliant buildings, making restrooms accessible, and supporting technology for captioning can be hard to find funding for, especially where small organizations are concerned.”

Grimm said this lack of support for disabled individuals transcends the philanthrosphere. “It’s an issue that permeates nearly everything,” she said. “Right now, people with disabilities, chronic illness and underlying conditions are not being prioritized for the [COVID-19 vaccines](#), for example. Right now, people who are reliant on Social Security disability benefits are jeopardized whenever they earn wages or receive a grant that takes them above the maximum income allowed by that governmental support. So we have a big problem, both within and outside of the arts.”

Barriers to access

Grimm’s insights suggest that when an arts donor or foundation leader thinks about supporting the disabled community, their thoughts may first turn to ADA-compliant access for disabled audience members—and rightfully so.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in four American adults has a **disability of some kind**—this group comprises the largest minority in the country. Deaf and disabled artists also “need to be able to get onto the stage or into the exhibition space if they are to be represented,” Grimm said, “so compliance really matters for them, and it matters to all of us who want representation in the arts to reflect our world.”

However, Grimm said, “Barriers for artists aren’t only about whether there is a ramp leading to a designated seating area or an aisle wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair—or an audio describer, captioner or ASL interpreter to relay what’s happening on stage or in a gallery.”

For example, say a theater artist with an unpredictable physical condition must comply with a strict rehearsal schedule to be hired by a company. Their condition may lock them out of the production altogether. Similarly, some disabled artists need personal assistants to accompany them to an audition. “But there is no compensation available for that support,” Grimm said.

Grimm also cited the relative lack of professional development and training programs to support an emerging disability-identified artist's path.

“How can that artist get noticed by the competitive arts system in the first place? That’s the deeper question.”

Calls to boost representation

These barriers, coupled with [what HowlRound’s Allie Marotta calls](#) “the inherent ableism present even in contemporary performance work,” can explain why disabled artists remain woefully underrepresented in theater, television and film.

In an [October 2020 piece](#) in the *Harvard Political Review*, Rosanna Kataja noted that 95% of disabled characters are played by able-bodied actors. “‘Wicked,’ during its 15-year run, has not cast an actress with physical disabilities to play Nessarose, who uses a wheelchair to get around,” Kataja wrote.

Grimm picked up on this theme. “In the area of artistic content, particularly in theater and film, characters with disabilities are still often played by non-disabled actors—a missed opportunity at the very least,” she said. “I am hard-pressed to come up with a good reason why almost any role couldn’t be played by disabled professionals. The work that’s needed to be done by our field to employ disabled artists requires commitment and attention, but is absolutely doable.”

That’s just the tip of the iceberg. Advocates like Grimm, Marotta, Kataja and playwright [Ryan J. Haddad](#) are calling on performing arts organizations to cast more disabled actors for all roles, as well as to commission work by disabled artists, musicians and playwrights, to produce work that speaks to the authentic experiences of disabled individuals, and to hire disabled staff.

“We are still missing a true reflection of the population in the arts field,” Grimm said. “More people with disabilities may be in the audience, but there is a disheartening disconnect between who gets the spotlight and who is in the seats.”

How the initiative came together

Since 2007, 3Arts has supported more than 1,200 artists across all program areas, representing approximately 70% women artists, 67% artists of color and 17% deaf and disabled artists working in the six-county Chicago metropolitan area. 3Arts has [distributed \\$4.5 million](#) through its grantmaking.

Prior to launching the DCLI, 3Arts provided customized residencies where disabled artists could determine their goals for creating new work and building their careers.

“While the artists each have at least one public presentation during the residency, for a good two years, we have been trying to figure out how to build their audiences and advocate powerfully for them,” Grimm said. “The DCLI is the next, and first, move to advance that work.”

The new initiative was informed by an online convening with the 11 participating artists that took place in November 2020. [3Arts’ accompanying report](#) outlines what it calls “key takeaways from the group’s conversation, such as the importance of continued connection and movement-building within this cohort and future fellowship participants, as well as the desire for an archive and/or physical space to serve as a center for Chicago deaf and disability culture.”

“Disability aesthetics, as an admired colleague once pointed out to me, can expand any art form, as a wheelchair-using dancer might do, for example, in performing a ballet,” Grimm said. Instead of being “inspired” by someone who uses a chair to dance or by how someone “overcame” an impairment to become a successful artist, disability aesthetics “has the capacity to burst open our complacent expectations of art forms and content in radically beautiful and powerful ways.”

Looking ahead, 3Arts will produce video conversations with each year’s cohort of four fellows and make them public on its website so that organizations who are looking to hire accomplished Chicago artists who identify as deaf or disabled will have a go-to resource.

“We want to establish a hub, in a way, to house a record of the artists’ words, works and ideas that have the potential to advance our city and our field,” Grimm said.

“A field striving toward equity”

3Arts’ work, coupled with Mellon and Ford’s Disability Future Fellows initiative, suggests that at least some arts funders are looking beyond considerations of physical accessibility and toward what Grimm called “the revolutionary and expansive nature of the disability culture movement.” I asked her what she would say to arts leaders and fundraisers looking to engage funders across this rapidly evolving space.

“We need to offer, bravely, our perspectives about what’s needed and speak as frankly as possible about that whenever there’s an opening to do so,” she said.

“The funding-fundraising system is, as we well know, imperfect and imbalanced. Fundraisers may be fearful

that pushing funders too hard for efforts outside their range of specific priorities may result in diminished support. At the same time, if we don’t challenge the entrenched structures, we won’t get to the other side.”

Again, this shouldn’t be a herculean challenge. Organizational leaders’ support for disabled artists seamlessly aligns with funders’ drive to cultivate a [more inclusive and equitable sector](#). “The work of supporting deaf and disabled artists is the work of supporting the huge percent of the population that identifies as disabled—and that work is part of what it means to be a field striving toward equity and reflecting the experiences of all human beings,” Grimm said.

The existence of the DCLI suggests that this pitch should resonate with most equity-minded arts funders. Grimm recalled a conversation she had with a foundation program officer that had no stated connection to disability culture. “I was invited to be candid about what I dreamed of for our organization—the proverbial gap that needs filling,” she said.

“Instead of trying to fit a square peg into a round hole, I opened up. I talked about how hard it is for a small local outfit like ours to ramp up advocacy for deaf and disabled artists. The DCLI was born from that conversation.”