The Need for Sustainable Documentation and Evaluation Strategies in Community-Based Arts Programs

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Abstract

Together, and if done diligently, both documentation and evaluation can engage communities, build relationships centered on respect and reciprocity, and guide strategic planning. Infusing regular administrative practices with a community perspective might facilitate programs that are more collaborative, successful, and maintainable. As staff burnout and turnover in the nonprofit sector have increased, the need for such practices has become more urgent. Designed specifically for community engagement and sustainability across staff sizes and planning cycles, this research presents three recommendations for improving documentation and evaluation in community-based arts programs. This research is most salient for nonprofit organizations that want to streamline and preserve administrative practices, structure their program documentation and evaluation to more effectively onboard staff, incorporate community voices into data collection, and/or examine overall practices intended to engage the community.

Introduction

     Sustaining the mission and vision of arts nonprofits while working with a small staff can cultivate a demanding workflow, especially if institutional knowledge is not retained. Employee turnover stunts momentum and forward progress. Quotidian or periodic tasks such as notetaking, program documentation, data analysis, and strategic planning are placed on hold as emergent issues arise. Yet, infusing regular administrative practices with a community perspective might facilitate programming and planning that are more collaborative, successful, and maintainable. Especially when considering community-based arts programs, documentation and evaluation are critical to ensuring that communities are engaged and that organizations are building relationships focused on respect and reciprocity.

     Community is a complex concept, revealed by listening to its many voices. Community engaged art acknowledges how the work "interacts with, supports, or complements others."[1] Community engagement, when guided by opportunities for that community to provide feedback, can take shape through interviews, focus groups, community collaboration and co-design, and deep listening.[2] Indirectly, too, arts administrators pursuing community engaged work may benefit by attending community events related or unrelated to their work and following up on new social connections.[3] However, these practices alone are not enough to ensure effective and engaged programming.

     Engagement is rooted in relationships. Building the trust essential to effective engagement takes time. Moreover, trust is difficult to measure. To ensure an organization is making progress towards its mission and goals, the progress must be documented. Objectives must be set, and later measured against outcomes. Such information should be invaluable to boards and funders. Documentation and evaluation are imperative to programmatic improvements, including maintaining and expanding relationships with the community.

     This research presents a snapshot of community engagement practices within an organization of study chosen for its breadth of community programming. This research asked how the organization of study defined community, community engagement, community programs, and success to identify areas of opportunity to build upon its existing practices. Analysis of interviews, primary source research, and participation in the organization's workflow revealed an unmethodical system of documentation, gaps in assessment, and an overall lack of an evaluation framework. Most importantly, there was opportunity to build upon its successful history to develop new audiences and better serve its community. The right data and stories just needed to be collected.

     Based on the research findings, this article offers three recommendations for documentation and evaluation that may not only bolster the impact of the organization of study, but also apply to other arts organizations seeking solutions that help to understand the community and meet its needs, improve strategic planning, and amplify programmatic and staff sustainability. Particularly, these recommendations apply to small or transient staffs with a high volume of work seeking to document and evaluate through a community-based arts management lens. These recommendations are:

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[1] Heather Infantry, "Work for Good," *Work for Good*, February 28, 2019, www.workforgood.org/article/be-your-own-lucky-charm/.

[2] "Community Engagement," Local Initiatives Support Corporation, accessed July 24, 2022, https://www.lisc.org/our-initiatives/creative-placemaking/main/creative-placemaking-toolkit/community-engagement/.

[3] Infantry, "Work for Good."

1. Identify strategies that focus on the who
2. Create documentation practices that support engagement
3. Define where you want to go, so you know how to get there

Documentation and evaluation are crucial for programmatic effectiveness. Common challenges within the field including staff turnover, burnout, and competing priorities, often make documentation and evaluation seem burdensome and inconvenient. Therefore, identifying and implementing sustainable practices may help to alleviate these stressors. The recommendations of this research can be a starting point for any organization—ranging from small and volunteer reliant to an established legacy institution—to reflect on their assets and processes with community voices in mind. It is important to note that this article is not the presentation of a case study. Rather, it aims to highlight the potential challenges and trends within the field of nonprofit, community-based arts administration. Therefore, other community-based arts institutions might find applicable and tangible discussion herein.

Methodology

This research adopted an ethnographic lens to examine the organization of study's (hereafter, The Organization's) programming; it was dependent upon field work to glean data, understand histories, and participate in current processes to analyze them. This research was approved by a university Institutional Review Board. In accordance with the research protocols, data is disseminated using a pseudonym for the specific organization (The Organization) and department (The Department) of study. All identifiers of the organization, documents of study, and the interviewee have been removed to maintain anonymity.

This project was grounded in two research questions: How does The Organization define community, community engagement, and community programs? and How does The Organization define and measure success? These questions were designed to surface documentation and evaluation practices for examination through a community-based lens. The Organization was selected for study because of its vast scope of programming (detailed below in Profile of The Organization). The researchers were interested in measuring program success against program objectives, and assessing if programs were serving who they were created to serve. The researchers discovered, however, that the data required to truly assess this was not documented. Programs and strategic planning were impeded as a result. Documentation and evaluation practices, discussed in this article, directly contributed to this gap in data collection.

Research methods included primary source research, participation in The Organization's work activities that spanned 15 weeks in the field, and interviews. Participants were recruited for an interview based on their role within the organization at the time of data collection. Targeted recruitment occurred through direct email invitation. Relevant to the scope of this research, there was an identified participant pool of three people; only one agreed to participate in the study. The researchers recognize the limitations this posed to the study. However, the small pool of prospective participants and hesitancy to share their experiences within The Organization provided insight and confirmation about the challenges of staff turnover and the related loss of institutional knowledge and complete record keeping. The interviewed participant was the only prospective participant who held a long-term leadership role within The Department and had historical experience within The Organization. All other staff were temporary and/or had been employed for less than one year.

The semi-structured interview was approximately 45 minutes and consisted of 12 open-ended questions. The interview questions (see Figure 1) aimed to reveal the participant's understanding and experiences with The Organization's approach to community engagement, program documentation, and evaluation. The interview was recorded and transcribed.

Figure 1: Interview Questions

1.	What is your role and history with The Organization?
2.	Describe The Department at The Organization.
3.	How does The Organization define "community" as it pertains to community engagement?
4.	How does The Organization define community engagement?
5.	How does The Organization define community programs?
6.	How does The Organization define community [arts]?
7.	What drives programming decisions?
8.	What role does the board play in programming decisions?
9.	How are programs funded?
10.	Who are stakeholders?
11.	What indicators are used to determine success?
12.	When was the last time programs were comprehensively evaluated, and what did that framework look like?

The extensive review of primary source documents, given the limited availability for individual interviews, allowed the researchers to more fully understand The Organization's documentation and evaluation processes. Documents utilized in this study included program planning records, program summary documentation, strategic planning documents, meeting notes, participant data, and public marketing materials. Analysis of the data contained in these documents also provided insight into how The Department shaped its story, what data it valued, what internal and external factors shaped decisions, and how programming evolved over time.

The researchers' ethnographic participation in The Department's work processes included following existing practices for documentation and evaluation, attending cross-departmental meetings, and facilitating programs. During this 15-week study period, the researchers worked alongside temporary staff, interns, volunteers, new hires, and decades-long employees of The Organization. This first-hand involvement allowed the researchers to gather data that might not have been otherwise collected by interviews.

Data analysis was ongoing and used triangulation, researcher observation, and thematic analysis. Patterns in the data were identified across all data sources including the participant interview, research observations in the field, and primary source documents. These patterns were then compared with current definitions and practices held by community-based artists or leading arts administrators. The researchers noted points of commonality and deviation that might help identify The Organization's positionality and opportunities for growth. One deviation, for instance, was The Department's indistinct approach to community engagement and community programs; it did not differentiate between these terms. The absence of information, too, informed patterns. Careful consideration was paid to what data The Department was or was not collecting. For example, The Department's programs intended to serve permanent residents of its county, but permanent addresses were not consistently collected, nor were they compiled for further study.

Additional barriers to access included unclear archiving of the documents that were referenced in the participant interview. Some documents were inaccessible to the researchers due to an unorganized filing system. This system for documentation was cluttered and hybrid; some files existed in hardcopy and had not been incorporated with other data, while others were in an organizational shared drive. File and folder names were not standardized throughout The

Department, impeding quick document accessibility. Additionally, because files were hard to find, they were not utilized to their full advantage in organizational planning. The inability to gain a complete examination of program records informs the proceeding discussion. Nevertheless, the most edifying and revealing data was gleaned through participation in departmental practices and the study of departmental documents. These methods gave the researchers a thorough understanding of The Department's quotidian practices, strengths, and challenges with documentation and evaluation.

Profile of The Organization

The organization of study was a mid-sized, legacy arts organization in the United States. For the purpose of this study, legacy arts organization is defined as an organization with a multi-generation history and a firm connection to the mission and vision of its founder. Typically, because of their longstanding reputation, legacy organizations are well-resourced with a strong donor and audience base. This section details foundational characteristics of The Organization. We hope this information also provides context for readers to assess the research findings and applicability beyond The Organization presented.

The Organization is situated within a region dependent on its tourist economy. The region is geographically sprawling, yet rich with cultural organizations. The Organization attracted a mostly aging, middle to upper class demographic. Grant and donor funding for The Organization were steady and consistent, with annual contributions in the range of $5-10 million. This support could be attributed to The Organization's legacy status and name recognition. The Department's programs were largely reliant on these contributions.

The Department was run by two full-time staff members managing approximately twelve programs that served about 4,000 people annually. At certain peak times throughout the year, The Department was supported by the addition of one to three seasonal staff. Of particular note is the high turnover rate and low recruitment rate within The Organization among both full-time and temporary staff. For example, a sizeable portion of The Organization's seasonal staff quit mid-way through their terms, and interns rarely applied for permanent positions within The Organization. The Organization's legacy status and profile coupled with its programmatic load presented a unique opportunity to research the administrative practices under consideration.

The Department, which facilitated community programs and outreach, recently became a standalone office within the organizational structure. This reorganization was a response and recognition that The Organization could better partner with the local community. The Department's creation allowed more focused administrative attention and dedicated resources to community programs through additional budget lines and staffing. This reorganization placed community programs as central to The Organization's five-year strategic plan. However, although known internationally as a hub for arts presentation and creation, The Organization was not as well known by local residents. The newly formed Department initiated programs that were designed to serve the local residents and community year-round, yet were determined by a small executive and curatorial team in The Organization. The Department's programs were varied in size and scope. Some programs were intended for all ages and experience levels, others for those versed in the artform; some for educators, others for college students; some performance based, others integrated in school curricula. The majority of events were held in person. Community voices and input were not part of the planning process; there was a disconnect between intention and impact.

The participant interview surfaced definitions of community-based arts administration and helped contextualize how The Organization, and The Department specifically, operated (Figure 2). The researchers noted that, in certain cases, The Organization's definitions of community-engaged practice differed from current theoretical trends within arts administration. Namely, the organization used *community engagement* and *community programs* interchangeably. While it operated under the assumption its programs were engagement, most

programs were truly outreach.[4] Programs were not co-created or designed with specific communities in mind. Rather, programs were created for and/or brought into the community. This distinction is essential to this research as it looks to integrate community voices and uplift engagement.

Figure 2: Definitions

Community	Any individual choosing to engage.
Community engagement	Engagement is a practice, not a deliverable. In a best-case scenario, engagement is a verb; that is, it is responsive, nuanced, reciprocal, and evolving. Engagement is rooted in relationships.
Community programs	The Department does not differentiate between community engagement and community programs. The interviewee states that programs embody The Organization's values and practices of engagement. Staff are ambassadors for engagement as they contextualize and demonstrate connecting points of a program for the community.

Program Documentation & Evaluation

The Organization worked to build on its strong and storied foundation while simultaneously facing challenges such as a small staff, limited staff bandwidth, high work volume, and frequent turnover. These are not uncommon concerns in arts nonprofits, and in this case, presented challenges for how program evaluation and documentation were conducted. This section briefly details three documentation and evaluation strategies that were in use at The Organization and highlights potential challenges for sustainability. These challenges were identified by the researchers through primary source analysis and staff input collected during the research period. The documentation and evaluation strategies below directly informed the researchers' proceeding recommendations.

First, The Department documented programs via a digital, narrative account of the event. These files included an event overview, participant quotes, and addendums which linked to planning materials, event websites, marketing kits, and health and safety protocols. Typically, documentation files were 2-5 pages. However, the quality of collected information was inconsistent due to the freeform structure. Often, they were not utilized in reflection, program evaluation, or future planning.

In addition, The Department had not been tracking participation or relationship data in its Customer Relationship Management software (CRM), but rather through a series of other documents including hardcopy logs, digital spreadsheets, or a typed list of participant names. There was no codified method or platform for tracking. Using dispersed platforms for participant tracking, rather than The Organization's central CRM, impacted effective marketing and overall relationship building. For example, data for any given individual was tracked in many different files. As a result, The Department was unable to note additional touchpoints participants may

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[4] Doug Borwick, "Differentiation," *Engaging Matters*, September 16, 2021, https://www.artsjournal.com/engage/2021/09/terminology-2/.

have had with The Organization. This practice meant relationship building and engagement was only assessed anecdotally. Participant trends including event attendance, demographics, donor history, or psychographics could not be ascertained.

Second, there was no comprehensive or formal structures in place to collect participant feedback within The Department. For select programs, participants shared feedback via a short survey or reflective conversations with Department staff. Feedback was not consistently elicited, and survey questions, if utilized, varied by program. Some surveys were handwritten and organized in a binder and others were sent via email. Other program participants were not surveyed or contacted for feedback at all. Results were not comprehensively compiled. All tools for gathering feedback from the community were open-ended, narrative questions.

A third challenge was that The Organization did not have a framework for program-specific evaluation, and evaluation did not occur as part of The Department's routine practices. Upon a program's conclusion, for example, no formal debriefs occurred with staff, stakeholders, or participants to discuss successes, areas for improvement, or other metrics. Program outcomes were not viewed against program objectives.

The above practices posed several threats to The Department's sustainability. Unclear documentation practices hindered the collection of comprehensive data, documents, and feedback essential to data-driven decision making and strategic planning. Moreover, inconsistent feedback collection, scattered participant data, and unstructured evaluations stunted program improvement and community-informed program creation. Considered together, The Department was unable to accurately measure the success of its programs and engagement practices.

These identified threats were reflective of the high levels of staff turnover and burnout within The Organization. Guided by the above findings, we offer three recommendations for codifying and implementing more sustainable documentation and evaluation applicable to The Organization and, perhaps, other community-based arts nonprofits. The recommendations are templates designed to be tailorable to an organization's unique situation, and are presented with staff sustainability in mind. The following section draws from arts administrators, educators, and community-based artists to convey the theoretical grounding and practical application of documentation and evaluation. Together, and if done diligently, documentation and evaluation can strengthen community relationships, increase program effectiveness, and guide strategic planning.

Discussion and Recommendations

While much of community work is about relationships, qualitative and quantitative data-based decision making is crucial to remaining responsive to an organization's community. Relationship building and data-based decision making are not mutually exclusive; they work in tandem and are crucial to ensuring that community voices shape organizational practices.

Based on our study of The Organization, we offer the following discussion alongside three recommendations. It is important to note that a deficit-based approach did not define our perspective of The Organization's administrative and programmatic practices. Instead, this research and recommendations illuminate common challenges throughout community-based arts organizations and are not solely applicable to just The Organization. Rather than a statement on the Organization's weaknesses, these challenges are opportunities to more fully engage, build on existing assets and relationships, and harness untapped potential.

The discussion and recommendations might be particularly salient for nonprofit arts organizations that want to streamline administrative practices, provide clearer structure for their program evaluation and documentation, and/or examine practices intended to engage the community. In addition, because we frame the recommendations to better integrate community voices into the documentation and evaluation process, we believe they are relevant to the work of community-based arts organizations.

Expand understanding of your community

Our first recommendation presented is to consider the essentiality of understanding the people, ideas, needs, and boundaries of the communities you serve. Community-engaged work benefits from critically considering who constitutes a community, how the community is defined, and how it is maintained. While understanding community may seem foundational to the work of many arts organizations—and despite a renewed emphasis on its import—an assumed understanding of community often still guides decision-making practices. As arts organizations seek to better engage community and assess which voices are present, administrators must be mindful of both the nuances and central tenets that shape community dynamics.

Community can be described as a group, perhaps with a specific culture, interest, or geographic tie, to which one feels a sense of belonging. Community is a complex and fluid concept, always redefining its values, members, and factors to which these members identify. Revealing and engaging our communities means embracing multiplicities. Similarly, one must consider the definitions, roles, and tensions of individuals as members of a group.[5] Political theorist Iris Marion Young notes that the ideal of community "privileges unity over difference […] expressing a desire for selves that are transparent to one another. […] The dream is understandable, but politically problematic because those motivated by it will tend to suppress differences among themselves or implicitly exclude from their political groups persons with whom they do not identify."[6] The sense of closeness and warmth that bonds a community, Young implies, is born out of natural exclusion.

Sociologist Benedict Anderson, too, considers the political ethos of community through his idea of the "imagined community."[7] Anderson considers the concept of nationhood, for

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[5] Petra Kuppers, *Community Performance: An Introduction* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), ProQuest Ebook Central, 9.

[6] Kuppers, 10.

[7] Ibid, 41.

example, as an imagined community. Members rarely know their fellow members or have any connection with them whatsoever. Yet, despite the actual limits of their communion, members believe in their group unity. Within this abstract community lies a true sense of comradeship.

Community can be created and depicted in our neighborhoods, workshop spaces, or onstage. Performed communities can be choreographically crafted through physical touch[8] or tight formations.[9] Though community can be simultaneously shaped and portrayed, care must be taken to avoid assuming an individual's communities and identities.[10] For an arts administrator facilitating community-based programming, such generalizations may impede inclusion and engagement, particularly among marginalized groups. Moreover, these generalizations can also skew documentation and evaluations practices that further disconnect an arts organization from its community.

Community creation within the class or workshop space can be reinforced through pedagogical structures. Word choice, phrasing, and class themes all serve to build or break down a community. Choreographer, performer, and writer Liz Lerman, for example, considers the political acts and hierarchies within an arts community, challenging them through small acts like introducing herself individually to each student and teaching classes as a means of creating community within the art.[11] Indeed, engaged programming is created in dialogue with the community. Herein lies the disconnect: The Organization was focused on community engagement yet did not implement practices that ensured they understood or programmed for the community they served.

Recommendation 1: Identify strategies that focus on the who

To bridge such disconnects, first identify who the organization has been engaged with, and more impactfully, whose voices have been missing or excluded. This process should begin with a critical reflection on each of the following: How do you know what you know? What tools have been used to acquire this information and have they been effective? How do you know they were effective? What community resources have been employed? What partnerships exist or can be developed to amplify resources and increase impact? What needs has the community identified in other contexts? Does the scope of the available data reflect everyone and everything impacted by your organization's work? This information can serve as the essential foundation for understanding who currently engages with the organization. More importantly, it provides a clearer directive for challenging assumptions and long held practices that might have—even unconsciously—thwarted growth.

Second, use CRMs to collect and analyze information from the community. Using this demographic and psychographic information is quite valuable when considering the composition of a community and, more specifically, an organization's constituents.[12] Large or legacy organizations may be at an advantage here, as they are better positioned to mine years of constituent data for trends and revelations. But, smaller, community-based, and/or less

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[8] Anita Gonzalez, "Tactile and Vocal Communities in Urban Bush Women's Shelter and Praise House," in *The Community Performance Reader*, ed. Petra Kuppers and Gwen Robertson (London: Routledge, 2007), 48.
[9] Gonzalez, 51.
[10] Ibid, 49-50.
[11] David J. Elliott, Marissa Silverman, and Wayne D. Bowman, "Movement Potentials and Civic Engagement," in *Artistic Citizenship: Artistry, Social Responsibility, and Ethical Praxis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), oxford.universitypressscholarship.com, 7.
[12] Michael M. Kaiser, "To Have and Have Not: The Arts in the Twenty First Century (To Date)," in *Curtains? The Future of the Arts in America* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2015), 27.

financially resourced organizations can take a play from a legacy organization's playbook and benefit immensely from this practice. Tracking relationships between individuals and affinity organizations, for instance, creates a network map that instantaneously broadens an organization's reach. Potentially, this opens it to new resources and segments of the community. CRMs are an ideal way to see these relationships and affiliations, and thus better understand the who.

Immediate steps The Organization could take to better understand their community are importing participant data from spreadsheets to its CRM, performing necessary data maintenance, and capturing all participant data directly in its CRM moving forward. In turn, this data—which, as stated above, ideally maps relationships, affiliations, and associations—can be used to make more focused programming decisions. For example, The Organization could study which regions are/are not represented by participants, if participants are tourists or permanent residents, or if participants engage in multiple ways (attend a class versus see a performance). This information details the breadth of engagement and helps tell The Organization's story.

However, arts administrators must take care not to program to the numbers. Programming that is curatorially driven or devised independent of community voices is rarely a community engagement program, but rather, a community program. In other words, community programs refer to programming created *for* the community rather than in response and collaboration with them. This research views this distinction critically as it looked for ways to uplift community voices, elicit community feedback, and integrate engagement into routine work practices.

Finally, understand that cultivating relationships—between individuals and groups, inputs and outcomes, and mission and strategic planning—*is* the central strategy for focusing on the who. Finding connective tissue by talking with your community, asking what they will/will not support, do/do not want, what they need, and how they would like to engage with the organization is the only way to make decisions that are reflective and responsive. These relationships guide administrative practices that are better aligned with the who, making programming more likely to succeed and clearly defining opportunities for growth.

The Organization's programs were created by a small leadership team disconnected from the community. The Organization might use the above practices self-reflexively to shift from community programming to true community engagement, thusly more focused on its mission. Similarly, other organizations might broaden their impact and employee bandwidth by focusing on strong relationships rather than numbers. Administrative decisions informed by and created with *the who* promote engagement more likely to succeed through a community's constant evolution and an organization's turnover. Perhaps most importantly, relationship-focused practices are more sustainable and fulfilling. This recommendation is the foundation for organizations to continue growing with and learning about their communities. However, it is important to note that expanding understanding of community does not simply occur through basic documentation and evaluation. Rather, it is supported through integrating community voices into the very design of those practices.

Build engagement through sustainable documentation

A second thread that emerged in this research is the importance of building engagement through documentation. It is common for event reports and surveys to be the primary sources of documentation in nonprofit arts organizations. They can be simple and effective tools for gaining insight into program effectiveness that can drive strategic planning, decisions on program sustainability, and actions for improvement. In addition, this type of data can provide a quick

snapshot of an organization's impact across the community and is important to funders. However, it would be erroneous to simply equate the use of event reports or surveys to building engagement, holistically documenting a program, or measuring success.

Consultant and educator Craig Dreeszen asserts documentation is the reporting of program activities and outputs. It is important to note that documentation is not evaluation; it preserves what participants did rather than the results.[13] Qualitative data can highlight the multidimensional nature of engagement, representing people as individuals who bring their own paradigms, cultures, and backgrounds.[14] This documentation can take various forms and include program plans, written observations, direct quotes, photographs, videos, drawings, surveys, reflections, and event reports leading to a fuller picture of the community and their experience.

Increased understanding, appreciation, and personal transformation are typically not affected by a single engagement with the arts. We also acknowledge that these are difficult factors to measure.[15] Therefore, follow-up tools that measure impact are necessary to documentation.[16] Feedback can be as valuable a resource as any monetary donation.[17] In the interest of subjectivity, "Everyone involved in a [community project] should have an opportunity to contribute to the evaluation process."[18] Community-focused documentation should thoughtfully consider design and implementation.[19] Therefore, community-engaged work is most holistically preserved through a collection of both qualitative and quantitative data sets.

While The Organization was gathering data anecdotally, it was missing the opportunity to collect quantitative and outcome-oriented details. As such, it was making decisions to continue programs when there was no data from participants or artists to indicate if this offering was successful or warranted continuation. Because community and other stakeholders were not intentionally included in documentation practices, The Organization was using sporadic and incomplete snapshots to guide decision-making and planning. This approach might also resonate with small arts organizations. Challenges of time management and staff size can necessarily default to only using one method (for example, surveys) or seeking one type of indicator (for example, anecdotes) as a 'some data is better than no data' philosophy. Indeed, the Organization's overworked and small staff was a driving factor for its gaps in documentation. However, as was also the case with The Organization, there are opportunities to better support data collection and documentation that do not require more staff, but rather better planning, to reflect community voice and experience. Clear, easy to follow, and thus sustainable documentation practices also support volunteer, part-time, or small staffs.

Recommendation 2: Create documentation practices that support engagement

We suggest a three-pronged approach to documentation and data collection: an event report, survey, and operation plan.

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[13] Craig Dreeszen, "Program Evaluation: Looking For Results," in *Fundamentals of Arts Management* (Amherst, MA: Arts Extension Service, 2007), 398.

[14] Kuppers, 206.

[15] Dreeszen, 398.

[16] Kuppers, 218-19.

[17] William J. Byrnes, *Management and the Arts,* 5th ed. (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2015), 131.

[18] Diane Amans, *An Introduction to Community Dance Practice* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 185.

[19] Joseph Telfair and Beverly A. Mulvihill, "Bridging Science and Practice: The Integrated Model of Community-Based Evaluation," *Journal of Community Practice* 7, no. 3 (February 2000): 37-65, https://doi.org/10.1300/j125v07n03_03.

First, we recommend the creation and implementation of an event report template as a means of basic documentation. A concrete structure for documentation can support the efficient and useful collection of data, particularly for temporary staff or volunteers who might have varying written communication skills. As staff turnover and institutional knowledge were ever-present challenges in The Organization, a formalized event report template would have helped operations to continue running smoothly as new team members were onboarded. An event report template ensures that all necessary details will be documented while still leaving space for narratives and reflection. Figure 3, created by the researchers, aims to prompt specific details important for reflection, evaluation, and overall documentation. It captures quantitative and qualitative data sets. Most importantly, it is brief and less cumbersome than a narrative or structureless format. As part of this study, the event report template was utilized within The Organization for seven of the fifteen weeks in the research period to document events ranging from residencies to tours to lectures to workshops. Staff reported greater efficiency, increased understanding of the purpose of documentation, and heightened attention to details necessary for sound documentation. Staffs' reported ease suggests that event documentation will be maintained. These reflections point to the template's sustainability.

Figure 3: Event Report Template

1. EVENT DETAILS

Event Name:
Event Date:
Event Type: [Onsite Workshop, Offsite Workshop, Residency, Virtual, Tabling, etc.]
Location:
Cost:
Itinerary:
Set up:
Doors open:
Artist arrival:
Event start:
Event end:
Strike:
Artists:
Manager: [staff contact]
Staffing Assignments: [roles of staff supporting the program]
Attendance: [community, staff participants, observers]
Production: [staffing support, equipment, issues]
Weather: [temperature and conditions]

2. SUMMARIES & NOTES

Participant Summary: [ability, retention, observations]
Event Summary: [content, exercises, qualitative narrative of event]
Venue Notes:
Venue contact:
Set up:
Signage:
Issues:
Accessibility: [physical space access, participant accommodations, content modifications, etc.]

3. MATERIALS

Planning Notes: [link to documents in a shared drive]
Marketing Strategy & Materials: [link to documents in a shared drive, social media, website]

4. REFLECTION

Highlights/Strengths	Needs Improvement
•	•

Participant Feedback/Quotes:
Documentation: [link/paste surveys, photos, videos, notes from participants, etc.]

Figure 3 displays the varied types of data that administrators can collect that might be measures of success or areas for improvement. Notably, this strategy does not rely on the community to offer verbal or written feedback yet still is a way to learn about community needs and experiences through observation and assessment of trends. Logging if participants came late or left early, expressed frustration with content, or thanked staff for a positive experience are all indicators that help assess engagement. This template ensures community voices are sustained. It also preserves facts that can guide small shifts to make events run more smoothly, such as increased staffing or varied signage, as well as logs participants reflections invaluable for grant reporting and program evaluation. A template that prompts specific details and notes which information is important helps acquaint staff with an organization and its processes.

Second, as a supplement to the event report, we recommend expanding the use of a survey tool to both maintain efficiency and better harness its creative engagement potential. We recognize that many arts organizations already utilize surveys to gauge feedback, and we offer the important reminder that learning about community needs and experiences does not require community members to complete a written survey. However, this recommendation expands the survey tool by carefully prompting data that informs program successes as well as engagement practices. While surveys were used intermittently, The Organization would have advanced its understanding of its community through a thoughtfully crafted and implemented survey that captured both its propensity for anecdotal data as well as quantitative feedback.

Ascertaining how a community sees itself in relation to an organization offers a fresh perspective to community-based arts. This self-reflexive information, coupled with the other demographic questions offered in Figure 4, helps administrators better define their community. As stated above in Recommendation 1, defining community and understanding the who complements engagement because it allows decisions to be reflective and responsive.

In this vein, administrators who deeply know and understand their communities will be better poised to anticipate and address barriers that impede survey completion.[20] If internet access is inaccessible in your communities, consider reserving the last five to ten minutes of a program for completion of a hardcopy survey. For organizations working with or hoping to better engage immigrant communities, consider translating the survey or seeking the partnership of an interpreter to aid feedback collection. To quell survey fatigue as well as bolster engagement practices, offer an incentive to participants that complete the survey. For example, this could be a gift card to a local business or a discounted ticket to another arts organization's program or event, thus turning feedback collection into an opportunity for deeper partner engagement.

The survey provided in Figure 4 aims to determine program successes, participation retention, who the program is engaging, and how to reach those it is not. The Organization might consider distributing the survey through multiple channels: linked in a post-event thank you email; posted prominently on its website; included in all email communications via language like, "Recently attended an event? Share your thoughts with us HERE."; and made available through paper copies at events.

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[20] Telfair and Mulvihill.

Figure 4: Expanding the Survey Tool

1. Name:

2. Email Address:

3. What event(s) did you attend:

4. Age:
   - 0-18
   - 19-29
   - 30-49
   - 50-65
   - 65+

5. How far did you travel to this event?
   - 0-10 miles
   - 11-25 miles
   - 25-50 miles
   - 50+ miles

6. To what communities do you identify? Please select all that apply, and specify additional communities below. This could be geographic place of residence, demographic information, interest/affiliation, etc.
   - Non-artist
   - Artist (performing, visual, etc.)
   - County resident
   - Employed
   - Fixed income
   - Student
   - Receiving financial compensation (unemployment, Social Security, etc.)
   - Individual with a disability
   - Veteran
   - Immigrant/Non-native English speaker

7. How did you hear about this event?
   - The Organization's Website
   - The Organization's Email Newsletter
   - Event Listing
   - Radio
   - Press
   - Tabling Event
   - Word of Mouth
   - Past Event
   - Social Media
     - Please specify source:
   - Other
     - Please specify source:

8. Have you attended a The Organization event in the past? Please check all that apply.
   - This is my first The Organization event.
   - Performance
   - Workshop/Class
   - Exhibit
   - Special Event (Gala, etc.)
   - Other
     - Please specify:

9. Please rate your experience in the following:

	Excellent	Average	Below Average	Poor
Overall experience	○	○	○	○
Ease of registration process	○	○	○	○
Class content and materials	○	○	○	○
Artists/instructors	○	○	○	○
Venue accessibility	○	○	○	○
Sense of belonging and hospitality	○	○	○	○
Likelihood of recommending a program to a friend, family, or community	○	○	○	○

10. What factors determine whether or not you will attend a class or workshop at The Organization? What can we do to better support your attendance?

11. Was this a positive or impactful experience?
    - Yes
    - No
    - How was this a positive or impactful experience?

12. As part of our continuing effort to improve the experience and accessibility of community events, we would like the opportunity to follow up with our guests by email with the overall survey results and responses to common concerns or questions. Would you be interested in receiving this communication?
    - Yes
    - No

13. Please share any additional feedback, reflections, or suggestions.

Finally, crafting an operation plan that details instructions and a basic production timeline for completion of the event report, survey, and the below recommendation aids staff accountability and simplifies implementation. Such documentation helps to integrate these processes into daily workflow by assigning them practical form. Moreover, it ensures that processes do not shift substantially throughout staff turnover, making archived event reports, surveys, and evaluations useful for future planning. An operation plan might increase the sustainability of these templates by making them clearer to implement and maintain. An organization could go a step further by creating handbooks that outline comprehensive departmental practices and values. In the absence of staff to onboard and train a new hire, such documents are invaluable. Organizations with limited staffing resources might start by deciding "how, when, where, and for what purposes data will be used."[21] Once that is determined, it can

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[21] Ibid.

identify which documentation tasks are critical, and codify them in an operation plan to ensure understanding for future employees and stakeholders.[22]

It is important to remember, too, that once utilized routinely, the recommendations herein can support and preserve institutional knowledge and mitigate the effects of turnover. "Institutional knowledge" within The Organization referred to: organizational reference points, such as memory of what worked/what did not, past leadership, and key events; the relationships a staff member has built with their community and colleagues; and personal experiences or connections. However, to truly preserve institutional knowledge, it should be cultivated through communication and information sharing at all levels of an organization. Inviting staff voices, expertise, and experiences into decision-making processes and implementing strong and streamlined documentation and evaluation practices can help shape, share, and maintain institutional knowledge.

Altogether, the Organization's narrative documentation and inconsistent data collection were not conducive to analysis, strategic planning, or furthering engagement. If The Organization wished to pivot to community engagement versus outreach/programming, utilizing the tools already in practice to some degree would increase understanding of their community and assist feedback collection. As relationships strengthen and The Organization sets engagement-focused goals, it could explore other strategies like focus groups, interviews, informal gatherings, or structured community-led audits to gather data. Like many other arts organizations and despite its legacy status and associated resources, its permanent staff were few and transient. These turnkey templates benefit an organization by incorporating all stakeholders (community, partners, and staff) in to the documentation process—a requisite for our final recommendation—and may help to broaden perspectives of who and how community-based arts programs serve their communities. Thorough documentation is the necessary connecting point between understanding a community and measuring success.

Connect community voices and sustainable strategies to evaluation

A third and final theme that emerged during our research was the acute recognition of the causal relationship between an organization's understanding of its community to its evaluation practices. To know and expand one's understanding of its community, it must evaluate the extent to which its engagement efforts are successful. The Organization was unable to define its impact beyond anecdotes because it did not have a clear destination. For example, program-specific goals were not developed, its community/communities were not clear, participant data was not collected, and community voices were not integrated into the planning process. Relationship building, documentation, and evaluation are cyclical and interdependent. Each informs the other. Of critical note—and was the case within The Organization and presumably small, less resourced organizations, too—the high volume of work associated with programs whose effectiveness was undetermined absorbed valuable time that could be spent on forward progress and true engagement. Indeed, "a plan is only as good as the goals and objectives that have been written,"[23] and later, evaluated.

Evaluative arts administration is crucial to nearly all facets of an organization's mission. Evaluation, or assessment, is the act of interpreting intended outcomes to measure success, calculate worth, and make judgements about the value of a project.[24] Evaluations can measure

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Byrnes, 164.
[24] Amans, 183.

impact on participants, the extent to which objectives were achieved, artistic content, and the overall process, among many other topics.[25] It demonstrates a program's value to funders or the board, preserving accountability to stakeholders while also determining if a program was a good use of funds.[26] It ascertains a program's success by depicting intended outcomes, unanticipated outcomes, and trends. Evaluation guides strategic planning and promotes a growth mindset for program improvement. And, it helps administrators understand a community to more fully meet its needs. Evaluation is an effective engagement practice because it prompts responsiveness to the community.

Evaluations consider outcomes, or specific results attributed to a program that describe the benefits to program participants, including knowledge, values, attitude, and skills. Outcomes can be short, medium, or long-term. Objectives are intended outcomes.[27] Additionally, outputs, or immediate, often tangible products or quantitative data, are tracked in evaluations. Outputs do not relate to or measure changes in participant behavior or environments. Outputs are demonstrated by indicators, which are measurable proof that demonstrates the extent to which an intended outcome has been reached. Indicators can be progress surveys, indirect evidence like observations, or other data sets that can be later quantified.[28] Finally, evaluations might also take into account benchmarks, or comparative data.[29]

Most importantly for this research, evaluations aid in making sustainable programming decisions suitable for a small staff and transient workplace. Evaluation can take three forms: needs assessment, process evaluation, and outcome evaluation.[30] For The Organization's purposes, process evaluations designed to monitor a program's course and outcome evaluations designed to measure results will be most salient. The strongest evaluations are both formative and summative.[31]

This recommendation builds upon the sustainable documentation and data collection practices offered in Recommendation 2 to assess program outcomes and relationship-building. While the Event Report Template and Survey raised opportunities to integrate community voices into documentation, the following recommendation demonstrates how to use this data to make community-informed decisions.

Recommendation 3: Define where you want to go, so you know how to get there

An evaluation framework, led by strategic planning and goal setting, can incrementally drive improvement to programs in a way that is also sustainable and manageable for modest staffing resources. The evaluation plan supplied below in Figure 5 can be completed with information obtained from the aforementioned tools. Potential indicators might be survey responses, verbal feedback, and observations—all details gathered through the previous recommendations. The Organization was missing the opportunity to evaluate its programs through its limited means of data collection and hazy definitions of success. In turn, it was making decisions that misaligned community needs and planning objectives.

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[25] Ibid, 186.
[26] Dreeszen, 399.
[27] Ibid, 394.
[28] Ibid, 395.
[29] Ibid, 396.
[30] Ibid, 394.
[31] Ibid, 400.

One brief, simple, and directional recommendation for The Organization would be to identify community-guided goals or needs for the purposes of building its engagement. Figure 5 illustrates how this could be incorporated. Additionally, it is structured to intentionally list highlights and quick facts that can then be used to draw conclusions. Although structured, the plan is flexible; it can have more or fewer evaluation questions, objectives, indicators, or outcomes than what is depicted in the template. It can be used for process evaluations to keep programs on track or outcome evaluations to measure results. Because communities are fluid and evolving, this flexibility yet objectivity is essential in community-based evaluation.[32]

The below plan impacts community engagement by situating community input in the continuous assessment process. It demonstrates how data can be used to make community-informed decisions. An organization could consider evaluating program success through an assessment of what communities it is reaching and if that is reflective of its goals. It could go one step further by employing the evaluation plan as a planning tool to predict impact in new community settings.
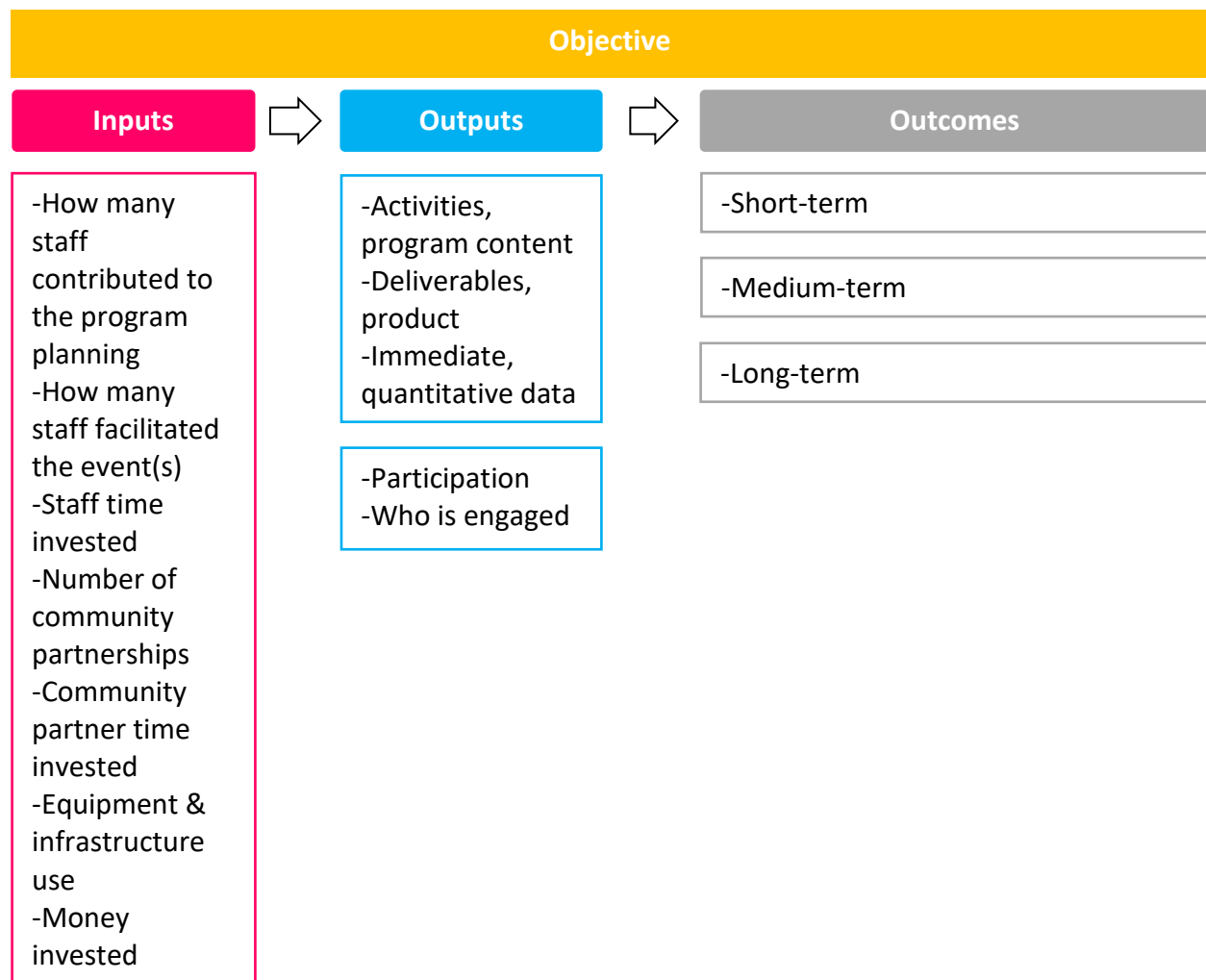
Figure 5: Evaluation Plan

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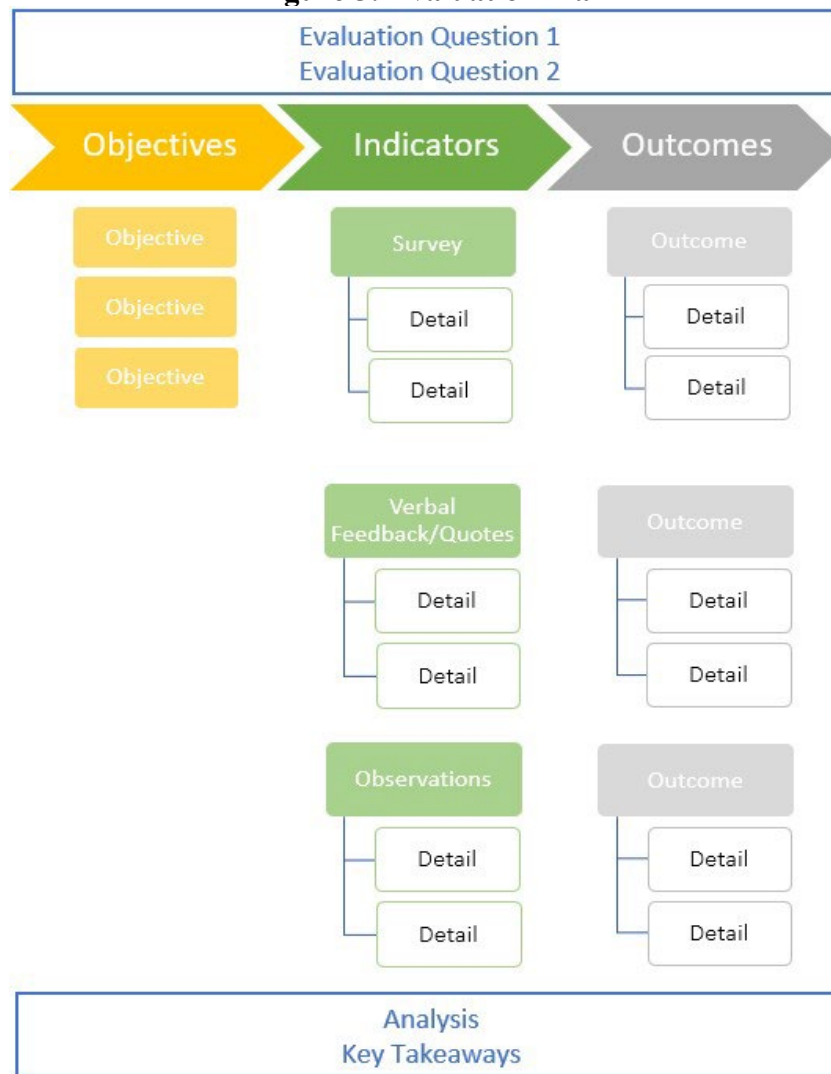
[32] Telfair and Mulvihill.

Second, to expand the evaluation plan, we recommend that a logic chain be utilized to guide programmatic improvements and assess connections to key objectives and planning. The use of the logic model in Figure 6 could supplement the outcome-based evaluation framework above. It is particularly useful in demonstrating program resources and results.

The utilization of evaluation plans and logic chains could also support the assessment of departmental practices, and potentially make a case for additional resources or reduced programs to meet community needs more effectively. For organizations facing the effects of turnover or burnout, evaluating programs through Figure 6 may be a fruitful process to reflect on staffing, program impact, and overall sustainability. It could also be used to provide evidence for staffing expansions that could be presented to organization leadership. In practice, The Organization could have evaluated through these recommendations to determine ways to increase its impact while limiting its overall load. This may have yielded less employee turnover by cultivating more sustainable administrative work and more fulfilling engagements.

Figure 6: Logic Chain

Objective		
Inputs	**Outputs**	**Outcomes**
-How many staff contributed to the program planning -How many staff facilitated the event(s) -Staff time invested -Number of community partnerships -Community partner time invested -Equipment & infrastructure use -Money invested	-Activities, program content -Deliverables, product -Immediate, quantitative data -Participation -Who is engaged	-Short-term -Medium-term -Long-term

Documentation and evaluation need not be burdensome to depict, measure, and cultivate growth. For small staffs or organizations new to evaluation, we recommend identifying the top three to five pieces of data that would have the most impact on better understanding your *who*. Tailor the event report template and survey to only include these points, perhaps expanding when and if staffing resources allow for more robust data analysis. These data points, then, can become program and/or departmental goals measured through the evaluation plan and logic chain.

It is important to remember that these recommendations are cyclical: evaluation is not a substitute for strategic planning or goal setting; having a firm understanding of your community does not negate the necessity of evaluation; and simply working with community groups does not ensure engagement.[33] The Organization did not evaluate because 1) Its documentation practices did not allow for it to collect the necessary data to complete an evaluation and 2) Burnout, turnover, and high work volume put staff time at a premium. The sustainable recommendations provided herein aim to alleviate these challenges by codifying simple processes acutely attuned to community voices. In turn, the recommendations benefit the community and strengthen engagement.

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[33] Ibid.

Conclusion

This article surfaced the need for sustainable documentation and evaluation processes in community-based arts programs and identified potential strategies. The Organization demonstrated that top-down decisions, disembodied from community input, were not conducive to engagement. Readers are encouraged to further consider the questions at the core of this research: How does your organization define community, community engagement, and success? Are these definitions hard to ascertain? How (or does) this inform your understanding of current processes for documentation and evaluation that drive mission and vision? Taken together, these considerations might impact engagement practices and reveal opportunities for growth.

Whether just beginning to know one's community or working to rebuild relationships, documentation and evaluation are imperative to engagement that is responsive and reflective of the communities we serve. The considerations herein reveal a more urgent need to both listen to the community's voice to guide decision making and to harness the power of various tools to conduct our work more efficiently. In turn, these efforts can also help ensure a more accurate preservation of community voice and timely progress of our work.

It is also essential to acknowledge that the day-to-day of many arts nonprofits is demanding. However, there is growing awareness and momentum to find solutions that address staff burnout, workload policies, and balance. An organization and its leadership can better focus on the important, rather than the urgent.[34] Thus, employees and volunteers are supported through clear, sustainable practices for daily administrative duties like documentation and evaluation. Strategically codifying and streamlining these tasks facilitates shared responsibility as well as shared knowledge. An organizations' internal stakeholders should also be viewed as an important investment in relationship building and valuing our communities. Staff retention and engagement contribute to a vibrant community.

The recommendations were designed for simplicity, yet they still require specificity and take time and care to put into practice. Doing less, but with more depth and breadth, may ease the burden for all organizations, but especially those with small or transient staffs. Identifying cuts to the programmatic or administrative load creates time for stronger documentation and evaluation practices that better serve the organization, the community, and ultimately, the mission. The potential for efficiencies in documentation and evaluation strategies to help ameliorate internal staff challenges is largely undocumented and unexplored. Therefore, we hope that arts organizations and administrators found the discussion and recommendations to be valuable, providing entre to critically examine how to uniquely tailor, consider, and incorporate these strategies to best fit the needs of small or community-based arts organizations.

Effective, engaged community-based programming is created and evaluated with and by its community. Capturing community input in all stages of programming through strong administrative practices sustains an organization and its staff. Indeed, a plan is only as good as its stated goals—and the impact of those goals is measured through evaluation. Ultimately, documentation and evaluation, when done strategically and sustainably, can demonstrate that an organization is attuned to its community and poised for future success and growth.

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[34] Sarah Durham, *The Nonprofit Communications Engine: A Leader's Guide to Managing Mission-driven Marketing and Communications* (Brooklyn, NY: Big Duck Studio, Inc., 2020).

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