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Towards Universally Accessible and Financially Sustainable Arts Education

The positive impact of the arts is well-documented through rigorous, quantifiable research. According to Americans for the Arts and the US Bureau of Economic Analysis, art and culture generated 4.2% of US Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2014, a higher percentage than transportation, tourism, or construction.^{i ii iii iv}

According to the National Institutes of Health and the World Health Organization, people who participate in the arts have lower anxiety.^{vvi} According to studies by Princeton University, arts education encourages cooperation, promotes understanding, fosters inclusion, and reduces delinquent behavior in high-risk youth.^{vii}

I believe that the data on arts education demonstrates that it should be preserved. However, arts education often struggles to provide quality programs at a price that is widely accessible, and those who could benefit most are usually least able to pay. I believe that the greatest challenge facing arts education today is maintaining both financial sustainability and universal accessibility.

In the private sector, arts education options include private lessons, in which a student works with an instructor individually or in a group and pays directly. This means that the private sector maintains financial sustainability at the expense of accessibility.

In the public sector, the focus is on universal accessibility. However, limited resources, such as teachers and instruments, decrease the number of students who can participate at low or no cost.

This project involved a literature review and an analysis of case studies. Works by arts education and arts organization management experts have been reviewed, including the academic journal 'Studies in Arts Education.'^{viii} 'The Cycle,' by Mr. Michael Kaiser, a global arts management expert, "presents a logical framework for how to build strong, sustainable enterprises one step at a time."^{ix} The DeVos Institute of Arts Management, a not-for-profit organization supporting arts management globally, teaches executives how to keep arts programs financially sustainable and widely accessible.^x

The first main case study was BRIDGES: Harmony Through Music at Cunningham Park Elementary School in Vienna, Virginia. Ms. Bonny Tynch, the choral director, founded this intensive after-school music education program after students asked for help learning instruments. They could not afford lessons, so she gathered teacher volunteers and formed a program. BRIDGES expanded by acquiring grants and donations to pay instructors and provide student aid. This made the program universally accessible. However, the program was unable to renew certain grants, making it unsustainable. BRIDGES is now working to relaunch with more stable funding.^{xi}

The second major case study is Acting for Young People (AFYP) in Fairfax, Virginia. AFYP is a private not-for-profit organization that directly charges students. This means that the program is financially sustainable, but not universally accessible.^{xii} In order to increase accessibility, AFYP recently created and piloted the 'Time to Shine' version of its program in collaboration with Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) and various grant-makers.

The third major case study is KidzNotes. This successful music education program in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina has balanced financial sustainability and universal accessibility by developing a network of reliable funding sources and public-private partnerships.^{xiii}

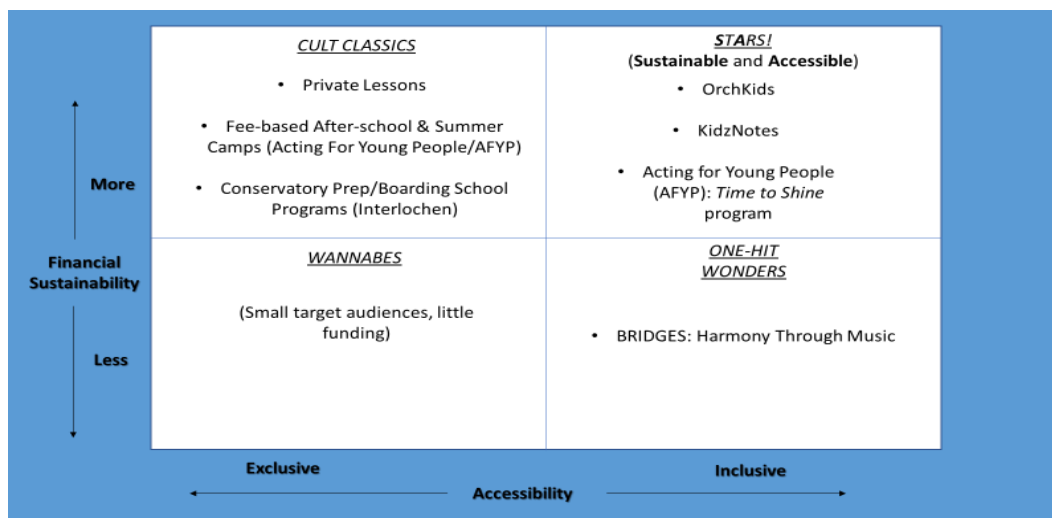
Other programs around the nation have been analyzed, including El Sistema Pittsburgh, a music education program for disadvantaged children, the Youth Lighthouse in Homewood, Pittsburgh, which provides young people with art and recording instruction, and OrchKids, a Baltimore program teaching children orchestral music.^{xiv}

I developed a four-box matrix to categorize arts education organizations based on a matrix used by the Boston Consulting Group.^{xv} The ideal category is the top right, ‘star’ programs which maintain both financial sustainability and universal accessibility. These programs include OrchKids and KidzNotes. The recently-created AFYP program for disadvantaged students, ‘Time to Shine,’ is also listed there.

The ‘Cult Classics’ maintain financial sustainability but with lower accessibility. Examples include private lessons and classes where students pay directly.

The bottom right category, ‘One Hit Wonders,’ contains programs that are universally accessible but financially uncertain. BRIDGES: Harmony Through Music is now an example of a ‘One Hit Wonder’ program because it has had difficulties renewing grants and obtaining adequate funding.

The bottom-left category is the ‘Wannabes.’ These programs have neither financial sustainability nor universal accessibility.



The case analysis and literature review suggest a framework of three key success factors to achieve both financial sustainability and universal accessibility in arts education programs. The first key success factor is diverse funding sources, such as grants, participation fees, donations, in-kind contributions, and volunteers. The second key success factor is using shared community resources, such as practice and performance spaces, teachers, and instruments. The third key success factor is creating public-private partnerships, in which a public-sector group, such as a public-school system, collaborates with private-sector companies and individuals to maximize resources, improve instruction quality, and increase reach.

As confirmed by Princeton University, the US Bureau of Economic Analysis, and Americans for the Arts, arts education has important positive impacts on young people and communities, in addition to contributing to a large and profitable part of the US economy and society. Therefore, the framework of key success factors developed in this research project should be used to allow arts education to continue serving well into the future as a great equalizer of society, as intended by American educator Horace Mann.^{xvi}

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