Learning from Grant LAB 2016: *Artists Up* Grantmaking Initiative for Individual Artists

Summary Report
January 2017

Artists Up 2016 Partners
Seattle Office of Arts & Culture | 4 Culture | Artist Trust

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Introduction and Background

Grant LAB is the outgrowth of work started in 2012 when staff from the City of Seattle Office of Arts & Culture, 4Culture, and Artist Trust came together to explore ways to more effectively serve under-represented artists. This collaborative effort, titled Artists Up (AU) undertook research between July 2013 and April 2015 including focus groups to hear directly from artists. These focus groups brought together forty-two artists to explore issues, concerns and barriers related to artist support in Seattle, King County and Washington State. Participants represented a broad range of ethnic and racial backgrounds, artistic disciplines and practices. The insights shared by these artists provided rich material and was summarized in a report prepared by AdvisArts Consulting in June 2015, *Learning from Artists: Focus Groups Conducted for Artists Up* and available on the Artists Up website.

The 2015 report identified promising areas for action, and Artists Up choose to pursue one area in particular: *Ideas, methods and approaches for making the panel selection process more responsive to the concerns and needs of artists of color*. A 'Panel Lab' was facilitated in December 2015 to inform further action. The majority of participating artists had attended an Artists Up focus group and/or had served as an AU Ambassador in the community. The input from this gathering helped to shape the form and approach to Grant LAB, from guidelines and selection criteria, to application review and selection processes.

Grant LAB Purpose and Process

The purpose of Grant LAB was defined: *To experiment with a new, artist-informed grant-making model, to increase equity and accessibility, especially for artists of color or historically under-represented artists.*

Grant LAB was developed as a small, one-time, funding program supported and administered collaboratively by the three AU Partner agencies. The goal was to test new approaches to grantmaking, informed by the opinions and experiences shared by Artists Up participants. In addition to this opportunity to apply for funding, Grant LAB also strengthened Artists Up's intent to increase communication with emerging artists with exposure to all agency programs including funding and skill building opportunities in Public Art.

A total of 18 awards of $3000 were made available (a total of $54,000), with artists from throughout the State of Washington eligible. Awards included the requirement to offer an opportunity to share in-progress or finished work in some form with the community.

Guidelines and Application

Guidelines were released in September 2016 with a deadline four weeks later. Workshops and a webinar were provided as well as individual communication with AU Partner staff to assist with the application process. Eligibility requirements were as follows:

- Individual artist residing in Seattle, King County, or Washington State
- Must not have received more than $1,600 from any one agency (the Seattle Office of Arts & Culture, 4Culture, and Artist Trust) in the past 2 years [2014-2016]
- Must not have student status
- Applicants must be 18 years or older

Each of the three agencies, and Artists Up as is own entity, promoted the Grant LAB opportunity through email and social media. The 45 Artist Ambassadors involved with Artists Up in 2013 to 2016 were asked to reach out to their contacts and also were requested to nominate fellow artists, particularly if the artist might not elect to seek the opportunity on their own. Each of the nominated artists was then contacted with a special invitation to apply. Workshops were held in Seattle and Kent, and a webinar was provided. 4Culture hosted the application and provided technical and application support.

The Grant LAB Application, hosted on a dynamic online platform, was designed to respond to the issue of evaluation criteria, and other suggestions heard in the earlier research. The application differed from the usual application materials used by all three partner agencies.

Reframing evaluation criteria – for applicants, and for selection panelists -- was a key element of the Grant LAB experiment. The voices of artists in previous Artist Up research clearly indicated that the target audience perceived that standard panel evaluation concepts (such as "artistic excellence") was prohibitively narrow, and prone to exacerbating biases that did not serve many artists. The three evaluation criteria were selected to signal a broader and more inclusive approach for all involved with Grant LAB. Artist applicants were asked to select one of three experimental evaluation criteria to inform the selection panelists regarding each artist's application.

- Potential or demonstrated skill
- Innovation/experimentation
- Community engagement

Narrative application questions provided an opportunity for open-ended responses:

1. Tell what training or creative experiences helped develop your art and/or cultural /traditional skills and when you received this training (formal or informal).

2. Give a brief description with date(s) and venue(s) of last artistic/cultural presentation (exhibit, screening, performance, reading installation, etc.) by yourself or with a group.

3. Describe what continues to excite, encourage, build or keep you working as an artist/cultural worker. What has inspired your last, current or upcoming work. If background plays/has played a role in your work, share how.

4. Where do you see yourself and your work in three years? What steps will help reach this goal (educational, professional, personal, financial or other).

Applicants had the option for self-identification "as a person" and also "as an artist." No check boxes were used, and it was made clear that this information on identity would not be shared with panelists.

Work samples were not specifically required, though applicants could elect to share examples of past or in-process work including video, audio, manuscript pages or images. Total attachments were required to less than 2MB and a variety of digital formats were accepted.

Artists were approached as collaborators in this experiment with the application statement: "*Thank you for experimenting with Artists Up! We are testing new approaches to grantmaking using a lens of equity, heavily informed by our work with participants in Artist Up focus groups and events.*"

Selection Process

Three multi-disciplinary review panels of artists from around Washington State reviewed and determined grant recipients. Panelists were selected for their individual artist status, and to reflect artistic and racial diversity. All three agencies agreed to common panel practices.

- Multidisciplinary panelists – all artists of color (each affinity group + geographic diversity)
- Request all panelists to <u>not</u> research applicants via internet or website
- Address issues of equity, racism, and bias prior to the selection process
- Conflict of interest and perceived conflicts declared/discussed
- Select one alternate per panel
- Passion vote – apply at close to the end
- Work samples – were not required, review if provided

More than 550 artists actively explored the application process by attending one of two workshops and/or by watching the Grant LAB webinar. A total of 184 eligible applications were reviewed by panelists, and 18 artist recipients were selected and announced in December 2016. A list of the Grant LAB recipients is in the Acknowledgements section of this document.

All artists who applied received a follow up online survey with ten questions, designed and administered by Artists Up staff. Using Survey Monkey, the survey asked applicants to provide feedback on various aspects of the application materials and process, and their involvement with Artists Up. A total of 95 of the 184 applicants – a very high response rate -- returned the survey. The results of this survey are incorporated into the Outcomes below.

"I appreciate the dedication and research Artists Up conducted in establishing a grant that is accessible to all artists. By engaging artists as allies and dismantling barriers the Grant LAB is advocating for an inclusive future in the arts. …" - Grant LAB awardee

Grant LAB Outcomes

A look at the Grant LAB applicants and recipients

Number of applications
A total of 211 original applications were started, with 27 incomplete, ineligible, or withdrawn. A total of 184 applications were eligible and presented to panelists for selection.

Geographic distribution
The majority of the 184 eligible applicants and the 18 awardees were Seattle residents, mirroring the State's population distribution, with 27% of awardees living outside of Seattle.

- Seattle: 119 applicants (65%); 13 awardees (72%)
- King County outside of Seattle: 24 applicants (13%); 2 awardees (11%)
- Washington State outside of King County: 41 applicants (22% applicants); 3 awardees (17%)

Evaluation Choice Criteria
Applicants were asked to select a Choice Criteria for evaluation by panelists. Funds were not allocated by these categories, and it was intended to broaden ways of evaluating applicants, and permitting applicants to indicate a sense of where they saw themselves and their art. Of the three experimental Choice Criteria, applications were submitted under:

- Innovation/Experimentation: 34 Applicants selected this, and 3 awards were made.
- Potential or Demonstrated Skill: 103 Applicants selected this, and 10 awards were made.
- Community Engagement: 43 applicants selected this, and 4 awards were made.
- Did not indicate: 5 applicants did not select a criterion, and 1 award was made.

"…Service has always felt like an important part of my work as a writer, and so selecting "community engagement" as an evaluation criteria for this award felt profoundly right. …" - Grant LAB awardee

Self-identity
Artists Up staff members examined the applications of the 18 awardees, following the panel process, for definitive language regarding race, ethnicity, disability, or identification as LBGTQ. This was in response to the fact that two of the three AU agencies are government agencies that must adhere to RCW 49.60.400, a state law that limits them from requesting and utilizing information on race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin, while the purpose of Grant LAB was to reach communities of color, differently-abled, and other historically underrepresented artists.

This staff distillation of the information in the applications is included here though it should be kept in mind that this was an informal process of analysis. The applications of the 18 artists awarded funding indicated that they identify as follows. Note that the categories are not exclusive so an artist may identify in multiple categories.

- o Person of Color: 12 awardees (67%)
- o Disability or differently abled: 2 awardees (11%)
- o LBGTQ: 3 awardees (17%)

Examples of self-identification via narrative answers:

I self-identify as an artist	I self-identify as a person
a. Poet/Fiction/Creative (Non) Fiction/Writer/Memoirist/Essayist/ Artist	a. Single mother/Mixed heritage/Boricua (Puerto Rican) Taino/Queer/ Femme
b. Freelance writer and editor, community journalist	b. Asian American (Sansei [Japanese American]/Pinay [Filipina American]
c. A musician and a writer. Polymath.	c. A 35-year-old Ethiopian, Scottish, Irish & Native American man.
d. Multi –cultural, multi-faceted, multi-media	d. Indigenous mother, wife and daughter – Native American, African American and Ashkenazi

"As an artist, as a person of color and as a writer, so often it can feel as though I/we are working in a vacuum, just hoping that we can make a bit of difference and recognition of this type--recognition of our work--is so important. " - Grant LAB awardee

Applicant response to the survey on guidelines and application
The post-application online survey provided insight into the applicant experience. The 184 applicants were emailed a link shortly after they submitted their application, and before the selection process had been completed. Ninety-five of the 184 artists responded. Nearly 90% of survey respondents had not attended an AU program or event prior to this application. Most learned about Grant LAB through one or more partner agency newsletters/emails, though more than a third (38%) noted other sources, such as word of mouth, social media, or websites.

- o More than two thirds (68%) attended a Grant LAB workshop or viewed the webinar suggesting that outreach processes were successful in reaching artists who were not well versed or confident in applying for grants from any of the three AU agencies.
- o More than half the respondents (56%) found the application process "very smooth", and only 6% found it "very challenging."
- o Survey respondents were asked how comfortable they were with answering the narrative questions in the application. The vast majority was "very comfortable" or "somewhat comfortable" with all these questions: Self-identification (85%); Expertise/experience (91%); Recent work (96%); and Inspiration and vision (96%)
- o Ninety percent of survey respondent would recommend the application to other artists who are first-time applicants.

"The Artists Up experiment represents a huge step in bringing fluidity and balance to the often daunting, rigid grant world, providing a more welcoming platform for artists to express their story and creative vision..." - Grant LAB awardee

Agency experience with the application and application process

Conversations and experiences with applicants were shared among the agencies' staff members and a debrief session was held. All three AU agencies experienced the Grant LAB experiment as a positive opportunity to reach out and engage with artists new to their grantmaking. The AU team had set a target expectation of 140 applications, which was exceeded.

The Application

A high number of requests for one-on-one assistance suggested that a grant application was a new, or relatively new, experience for many. Some applicants required an exceptionally high level of assistance and significant time in comparison to agency experience with other grant programs.

Artists expressed enthusiasm in being asked more open-ended narrative questions. Comments on the application process included appreciation that this was "not about assimilating to white culture" and one applicant cried while stating "no one has ever asked me why I do this".

Efforts were made to "decode" all language in the application and to strip down the application components to those things essential to the decision-making process.

"The Artists Up 2016 Grant LAB award has given me the certainty to keep applying for future grants. I appreciate how non- intimidating the application was formed. The questions were simple to understand and because of that I felt confident in my responses." - Grant LAB awardee

"I found the application process to be more engaging, based on the research of, increased awareness of regional artist's needs; for the guidelines and question format they've developed allows for and generates a greater merging of the subjective qualities of the application process of the artists within a diverse community, and extending it beyond the standard models established (entrenched), in so many other grants, fellowship formal modalities...." - Grant LAB awardee

In retrospect, agency staff identified how well the application had, or had not, worked.

- o Simplified language and open-ended narrative questions were appreciated, though required clarification for many, especially those new to applying for grants.
- o The application may have stripped out too much, creating confusion and ambiguity and confusing artists who had prior application experience.
- o Being explicit about the experimental aspect of Grant LAB was positive and made applicants see themselves as partners in this process.
- o It was valuable to clearly state, "artists of color are encouraged to apply".
- o The experiment with Choice Criteria helped to open up thinking, but was difficult to understand and would require more specificity to be used effectively.

- The self-identity section was welcomed by most applicants but was somewhat confusing. Artists were pleased to not check boxes regarding artistic discipline, race, gender, and disability, though many artists made this information explicit in their open-ended answers.
- Artists with prior grant application experience expressed some bafflement that the grant was not project based, not a fellowship, and not specifically output based. The shift away from those elements was applauded in comments made, while there was a desire for greater clarity on grant selection criteria.
- A few artists with significant professional experience wished there was an option for including a resume to better reflect their accomplishments, while emerging artists appreciated not needing a resume to apply.
- The lack of directives regarding work samples was confusing for many artists.

"The application process felt like I was actually being given a chance. As an emerging artist, it can be daunting to apply for grants when you have limited formal training and a short portfolio. Although credentials are important, they don't dictate the level of passion or capacity for impact my work will have. This process validated the varied walks and stages of an artist." - Grant LAB awardee

"...your approving my application has shown me that anything is possible. I've never written a grant before. Much less on my own. They terrify me. But even with a cognitive brain injury, your application process is very friendly. I was able to express the relationship between the beauty I see, my fingers, and my medium, in the allotted number of words requested. And do it clearly enough for all of you to glean my passion, and award me this grant..." - Grant LAB awardee

Panelist response to the application as a selection tool

Panelists shared their perspectives on the selection process with AU staff, during and after the panel proceedings.

- Panelists were appreciative of the experimental nature of Grant LAB and the invitation as artists of color to serve on the panels.
- Some panelists found it challenging to work with the lens of equity without having clear information on the demographics of the applicant pool, though they were diligent in their review of the narrative questions and independently gleaned lots of relevant information from the narrative answers.
- Choice Criteria were difficult to evaluate in any way, and were not ultimately useful in the selection process for most panelist.
- Some panelist found it unclear where to start from without a stated project and project budget.
- Open-ended questions had no space limitation, which was unwieldy and time-consuming for panelists to review.
- Panelists felt hampered by not having the artist clearly indicate their artistic discipline(s).

- o The inconsistent nature of work samples (due to lack of specific requirements) was a challenge to understanding some artists' work.
- o There was some misunderstanding among panelists regarding advance review of the applications resulting in uneven preparation.
- o Various techniques were used successfully to avoid or minimize peer pressure in the selection process.

Key Lessons Learned and Recommendations

Grant LAB fulfilled Artists Up's purpose to conduct a bold grantmaking experiment focused on individual artists who have not been well represented by agency grantmaking. The process provided opportunities to stretch and test various standard practices used by the Artists Up Partner agencies. The experience and outcomes offers an opportunity to reflect on areas of continued opportunity and suggests ways to refine and improve efforts to serve all artists in Seattle, King County and across Washington State, and elsewhere. Seven key lessons learned are summarized here and serve as recommendations for future work that can advance the goals of Artists Up and other programs focused on reaching and serving a more inclusive pool of individual artists. They are listed in the order of the grant making sequence and do not reflect prioritization among the findings.

1. Relationships matter. Build trust and networks within communities you hope will apply. The strong response to Grant LAB was tied to the relationships cultivated over the four years of Artists Up. This included the work of agency staff members and Artist Ambassadors in communicating regularly and directly with artists in communities that were not strongly engaged with the Artists Up agencies.

2. Language and assistance make a difference. The tone and wording of guidelines, communications, and applications speaks loudly to many artists. Applications that wish to be welcoming to the broadest array of artists will benefit from careful use of language that is clear, simple, and devoid of jargon. Take care to limit required components to only those elements that are essential to the decision-making process. It is important to **provide multiple forms of assistance** in understanding and navigating the application process to lower barriers for less-experienced applicants.

3. Each application is a story about an individual. The unique voice of an artist is strongest in open-ended questions. A more nuanced picture of the artist and their work emerges in open-ended questions. This may require more time and attention on the part of panelists to engage with the information. When requesting narrative components, be generous on space but provide a word limit.

4. New evaluation criteria can open thinking. Artists applaud the use of evaluation criteria that go beyond current standards, though care must be taken in providing definitions to guide both artists and panelists. New criteria help to enlarge thinking about what is valued in art and encourages questioning beyond the status quo. Artists welcome this, though primarily as an indicator that the grantmaker views artists and art making in a broad way. Panelists are challenged to effectively use such criteria for selection unless the panel is provided explicit

directives on how to consider these criteria. Grant LAB underscored the potential benefits of broader evaluation criteria, and the work ahead to effectively implement this.

5. Self-identification is complex and meaningful. There is a delicate balance in removing check boxes and requesting open-ended opportunities to express race, ethnicity, gender, disability, and artistic discipline. Artists appreciate writing about themselves holistically, without checking boxes. Grant panelists and administrators may find themselves doing formal or informal coding of answers to open-ended questions to understand how well the applicants or awardees meet the intent of the grant to reach certain populations. There is meaning and value in understanding who the applicant is, and how they do, or do not, see this in relationship to their art. This is important for many artists and panelists, despite the legal challenges for public agencies in gathering such information. If open-ended responses will be coded, this should be made evident to applicants. It may be most effective to provide an open-ended response option to expand on or augment check box categories.

6. Work samples provide essential information. Provide flexibility with clear parameters regarding samples of artistic work. A competitive selection process in the arts requires an ability to examine artistic work, and panelists rely on a baseline of that information from applicants. Most artists welcome some guidance and guidelines regarding what will be helpful in understanding their artistic work, though they also appreciate flexibility to shape the specific submission.

7. A panel focused on equity is attentive to equity. Panel selection influences award selection. Grant LAB panels were made up of artists of color. Their experiences and perspectives influenced the discussions about the artists and the artwork, and the selection decisions.

> *"…I would encourage any artist to trust themselves and the Artists Up Organization. We are so fortunate to have access to such a support system here in Seattle. Apply, apply, apply. Si se puede. Don't give up. Follow your dreams. …"- Grant LAB awardee*

Conclusion and Next Steps

The lessons learned align with many findings from previous Artists Up research, and additional research and conversation in the arts sector. While this echoes other findings it is noteworthy that Grant LAB provided more significant reworking of application materials and the selection process. This effort went beyond tweaks to an application process to encompass reconsideration of each phase and component. As a one-time experiment Grant LAB tested multiple dimensions of change, in concert with each other.

This summary report is a tool for each agency as they examine their existing grant practices, and consider improvements and adjustments. The Lessons Learned and Recommendations provide seven areas for adjustment or change in grantmaking practices. Grant LAB can also stimulate thinking and action on new initiatives that can recalibrate or redirect selection processes. It will influence the next phase of Artists Up programming and communication. The staff involved with Grant LAB has the intent and hope that this experiment will spur reflection and change far beyond Artists Up.

"The Grant LAB component that felt like the most meteoric shift in the status quo of artist funding…was the content requested by the application. From eliminating the demographic check boxes to rephrasing questions in a more human, personable way, we saw a drastic increase in new-to-us applicants to this award."
– Grant LAB Agency staff member

Acknowledgments

Panelists

- Natasha Alphonse –Seattle
- Juventino Aranda – Walla Walla
- Ivan Arteaga – Seattle
- Silong Chhun –Tacoma
- Kiana Davis –Renton
- Ari Glass –Seattle
- Chad Goller-Soujourner – Seattle

- Kamla Kakaria – Tukwila
- Srivani Jade – Kirkland
- Wilson Mendieta – Seattle
- Ruben Rodriguez Perez – Seattle
- Rudy Roushdi – Seattle
- Melissa Woodward – Shoreline

Grant LAB 2016 Artist Recipients

- Kamari Bright
- John Bunkley,
- Danielle Christian
- Alex Crozier
- Lynn DeBeal
- Rome Esmaili
- Kiana Harris
- Sarah Moreno León
- Emma Levitt

- Xavier Lopez
- Sarah Maria Medina
- Marilyn Montufar
- Tamiko Nimura
- Sandra Pressley
- Gabriel Teodros
- David Tucker
- Gordon Wood
- Miriam Zmiewski-Angelova

Artists Up Project Team, 2015 – 2016

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For additional information on Artists Up please visit
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