

Artists Up at Ten Years: 2012 to 2022

Infrastructure and Sustainability Final Report

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AdvisArts Consulting

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In Spring 2022, the multi-agency staff team involved with Artists Up (AU) decided that the tenth anniversary of the initiative merited reflection and assessment. There was also a need to document the history and accomplishments of the first decade of Artists Up to ensure that the story of this initiative and the lessons learned can be used as a foundation for future work. Artists Up enters a new phase as it moves beyond the full involvement of the original founders, and there is a need to consider issues of infrastructure and sustainability as well as its purpose and programming. This research and report were made possible with the support of the National Endowment for the Arts.

In May and early June 2022, interviews and conversations were held with a total of thirteen individuals affiliated with Artists Up. Eight confidential interviews were conducted with individuals who had been involved in the first decade of Artists Up. Five of these played roles as founders and/or arts administrators from participating agencies: the City of Seattle Office of Arts & Culture, 4Culture, Artist Trust, and ArtsWA. Three individuals were artists who have participated in Artists Up as mentors and as AU community Ambassadors over a period of years. Six additional individuals who currently work with AU participated in a facilitated group conversation. All data gathering was conducted online via Zoom by Claudia Bach, AdvisArts Consulting, who has been involved with earlier planning and research with Artists Up since 2012.

This report provides a brief history of Artists Up followed by six findings. Each finding is further explored with additional information on that subject from the research process. The report ends with a list of possible questions to guide next steps in a more extensive planning process. This assessment was not envisioned as a full planning process, but as a moment to take stock of Artists Up, capture the experiences of its founding, and identify key issues that can shape planning for the future.

A Brief History of Artists Up

“We saw the same artists being funded...would get together and vent, but not make change.”

Colleagues at various arts agencies in the Seattle region have always been collegial, but in 2012 three individuals reached a moment where they chose to take collective action on an issue they were each personally passionate about. Irene Gómez at the City of Seattle’s Office of Arts & Culture, Miguel Guillén then at Artist Trust, and Heather Dwyer of 4Culture had many decades of arts administration experience among them, and all three had observed inequities regarding the pool of artists served by their agencies individually and collectively. They wanted to find ways to serve artists who were consistently marginalized: artists of color, artists with disabilities, recent immigrants, those living in the non-urban core, and artists with low income or low access to resources.

They were joined in 2013 by Marcia Iwasaki of the Seattle Office of Arts & Culture’s Public Art Program, who had heard from Irene about these efforts and joined in since this aligned with her stymied efforts to address similar issues in the realm of public art. All of these individuals encountered challenges in getting permission to dedicate time and resources for this nascent effort, but they decided it was worth forging

ahead regardless. They were assisted by a paid intern, Vanessa Villalobos, who helped catalyze this effort by asking Irene “is there something you have always wanted to do?” and helping to convene the group. The genesis was around finding ways to increase the number of underrepresented artists applying for and receiving funding and other services focused on individual artists from these agencies.

These individuals worked with AdvisArts Consulting to do a research scan of relevant programs across the nation. They then intentionally reached out to hear from artists. A report on those conversations, *Listening to Artists* (AdvisArts, 2015), drew together what was learned through four artist focus groups organized by Artists Up between July 2013 and April 2015. The intent of this research was to hear directly from artists so that their voices could inform the planning and activities of Artists Up, and by extension, 4Culture, Artist Trust, and the Seattle Office of Arts & Culture. Forty-two artists explored issues, concerns, and barriers related to artist support in Seattle, King County, and Washington State. The initial focus group was held with Latino/a artists in 2013. The second and third groups were convened in 2014: one with Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander artists and another with Black, African American, and African artists. The fourth and final group was held in April 2015 with Native American artists. The name and purpose of Artists Up were also defined.

Miguel Guillén moved to a new position at ArtsWA in 2015, at which point Barbara Mizoguchi stepped in briefly to represent Artist Trust. She was then replaced by Katy Hannigan who represented Artist Trust as staff lead on AU from 2016 to early 2018, at which point Artist Trust left Artists Up. ArtsWA became allied with Artists Up in 2018.

A major initiative of Artists Up in 2016 was Grant LAB, an outgrowth of work started in 2012. A report, *Learning from Grant LAB 2016: Artists Up Grantmaking Initiative for Individual Artists* (AdvisArts, 2017), was released in January 2017. The purpose of Grant LAB was defined as: *To experiment with a new, artist-informed grant-making model and to increase equity and accessibility, especially for artists of color or historically under-represented artists.* It was developed as a small, one-time funding program supported and administered collaboratively by the three original 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 \$3,000 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. The lessons of Grant LAB were focused on ways that competitive processes (grants, fellowships, and public art) should reconsider outreach, communication, the application, the panelists, and other parts of the selection process to create a more accessible and equitable approach.

In 2018, based once again on feedback from artists, Artists Up launched a coaching project, designed to match established artists in the Seattle area with emerging artists and provide mentorship and guidance to help those early-career artists chart a path to artistic success. The program was well received with 95% of participants saying they would recommend the program to another artist, but it was time-intensive to administer, and many artists noted it was hard to schedule and find spaces to meet with their mentor or mentee. In 2019, AU discovered Mentorly, an online artist-to-artist mentorship platform based in Canada. They partnered with Mentorly and reimagined their coaching program as an online, state-wide initiative. Artists Up began awarding four-session scholarships to artists, who were given access to Artists Up’s dedicated page on the Mentorly site where they could choose the mentor(s) of their choice, easily schedule sessions by looking at the mentor’s availability, and meet with their mentor via video call.

Mentors were paid by Artists Up, and they also had the opportunity to have a public profile on the site and be paid to work with non-Artists Up mentees. Mentees could also choose from a roster of non-AU mentors if desired and those sessions would similarly be paid for by Artists Up.

The Mentorly Scholarship pilot cycle took place in November 2019, and multiple cycles occurred in 2020 and 2021. In June 2020, data from the first three cycles of the program were analyzed to look for areas of improvement and to see if the program was serving its target demographics. Casey Moser generated the *Artists Up Preliminary Data Report: First Three Cycles* which examined post-program mentor and mentee surveys, including open-ended responses that provided suggestions to refine the program to better serve artists.

The Mentorly Scholarship program was able to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic because of its virtual nature, and in fact, some other arts organizations in the state looked to Artists Up's online programming as a model for how they could reach artists during pandemic lockdowns. The King County Cultural Resource working group used the Mentorly Scholarship program as a template to connect artists with online pandemic assistance from April to August 2020.

In early 2020, the AU team asked the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) for support in expanding AU's mentorship scholarship program and writing a report to the field. In 2021, Artists Up received \$30,000 towards two years of the Mentorly Scholarship program and a related assessment, of which this report is one piece.

Much has changed in the field of artists' services—and the country and the world—in the past few years. There has been increased acknowledgment and reckoning with systemic inequities and how social justice issues impact support for individual artists and the agencies that serve them. Artists Up was founded while many of these concerns were less openly addressed and has been part of the process of change that continues to require intentional action for the future.

"Let's not just keep bitching and moaning, and do something!"

Key Findings

The interviews and conversations conducted in May and June 2022 point to two simultaneous tracks as foundational to Artists Up. The first track is in **building and bolstering the careers of underserved artists**, directly providing programs, connections, and support. The second track is as **an internal advocacy voice to explore and catalyze change** in the participating agencies to benefit these artists. Both can be seen as foundational in the ten years of AU's activity and should be kept in mind when reading the findings.

Six key findings emerged. Each finding is expanded on in the following section. Please note that the order of the bulleted statements does not reflect the level of importance.

1. Artists Up has moved the needle in serving marginalized artists via the participating agencies during its first decade.
2. Collaboration and commitment to a shared vision, artist-based research, and flexible adjustment permitted Artists Up to create change.

3. Artists Up developed “at the margins” and has always faced limitations of human and financial resources.
4. Artists Up should continue to be shaped by underserved artists’ needs and ambitious collaborative purpose.
5. Stronger administrative systems and stable support can significantly bolster Artists Up and are essential for it to continue.
6. Artists Up needs to communicate more effectively with artists, mentors, arts administrators, and also within the participating agencies.

“We administrators made a paradigm shift on evaluating an artist’s application... making it less high-brow pompous and more accessible for diverse emerging artists to consider and navigate.”

1. Artists Up has moved the needle in serving marginalized artists via the participating agencies during its first decade. The work of AU has pushed forward DEI discussions boldly within artist-serving agencies to create a path during a decade when real change was slow. AU has resulted in change both within the agencies and by directly reaching and serving marginalized artists through AU programs.

We heard that:

- Finding a collective way to organize and work for visibility for underrepresented artists created a substantial platform for action that agencies could build on.
- Helping to build awareness within agencies and across agencies made it harder for agencies to ignore issues regarding equity.
- Organizing the initial “Listening to Artists” work around ethnically specific communities and working with Ambassadors from each community proved to be key steps in reaching marginalized artists and expanding networks.
- The Grant LAB project reimaged and experimented with the artist selection process, creating a system that was more artist-centric, less institutional, and more approachable.
- The impact of Grant LAB “absolutely created changed grant programs” and this became evident in changes to numerous selection processes in the participating agencies and beyond.
- Mentors report seeing evidence of changes in selection process language.
- A variety of funding programs and initiatives such as 4Culture’s Artist Fellowship and Open 4Culture, and the Seattle Office of Arts and Culture’s Public Art Boot Camp are seen as the direct lineage of AU, as is the practice of paying panelists.
- The impact on agency staff involved was strong and created change such as in “the way I thought about my work. I use what I learned through Artists Up every day in my work.”
- There is some concern that AU’s accomplishments have, at times, given agencies an easy out on working on inclusion of diversity issues by keeping this work siloed.
- AU has been able to connect artists with mentors who are passionate about helping other artists and have meaningful and culturally appropriate experience and knowledge to share.
- AU was able to share information on creating such change with the larger fields through presentations at national conferences.

“We knew there was a better way.”

2. Collaboration and commitment to a shared vision, artist-based research, and flexible adjustment permitted Artists Up to create change. This combination has helped to create impact by pushing usual agency methods and boundaries and through the energies and tensions of deep collaboration.

We heard that:

- The shared passion, commitment, and tenaciousness of the founders to the purpose of the initiative were bolstered by their trust and long-standing relationships.
- AU provides a way for agencies to invest in knowledge sharing and shared learning while helping to eliminate unnecessary duplication of effort (for programs and research) through “soft” collaboration and connections.
- Collaborative efforts strengthened the network of artist-serving organizations in the regions and expanded the combined reach of agencies, sharing their abilities to reach diverse artists.
- The initial four gatherings (“Listening to Artists” 2013-2014) modeled a community engagement and research process that led to meaningful input from artists who are not often heard and shaped next steps.
- AU has been a “revolutionary opportunity” though it “opens us up to more uncertainty” and that challenges existing agency systems.
- Research and reports were effective ways to explore and shape AU while also permitting organic change and experimentation.
- The AU Team’s shared values around the purpose of AU and a core belief that support for marginalized artists needed creative and committed experimentation and solutions.
- A strong mix of different skills, talents, and experience was brought together by AU team members from the beginning.
- The AU founders benefited from “having each other’s backs” to provide a safety net of support as they tried to shake things up in their agencies, a process that often felt vulnerable.
- Artists Up continued to give assurance there was a role for white allies in the community of grantmakers.
- The networking among the AU team was very important to some younger participants, including interns, and a great training ground.

“An incredibly challenging collaboration to be part of... but the work we did together was GOOD!”

“It wasn’t easy, and it was always evolving.”

3. AU developed “at the margins” and has always faced limitations of human and financial resources. Cross agency collaboration made very evident differences in bureaucracies, legal constraints, power structures, and financial and staffing allocations and support. Collaboration and “benign ignoring” by agencies also had benefits for this phase of the initiative.

We heard that:

- Team members’ respective roles in each agency, and limited levels of power and autonomy, created a situation where AU was mostly “working at the edges.”
- Staffing time and recognition varied considerably creating uneven capacity to participate and an imbalance in investment of time.
- At times there have been some challenges related to personalities, as well as tensions around control or concepts of “ownership.”
- Some mentors experience AU as “feeling off to the side” for agency staff.

- Paid interns added essential capacity, but such positions have been inconsistently funded creating irregular levels of internal and external administration.
- The lack of clearly defined roles was problematic internally and has been confusing for some mentors and new members of the AU Team.
- Collective decision-making has gotten “more convoluted” over time.
- Government agencies have different constraints on the rate of change than those of non-profit organizations, so implementation timelines can be frustrating for nongovernmental partners.
- AU has benefitted in some ways by being “below the radar” by the participating agencies, but as agencies are changing it is time to explore how to bring AU “into the fold.”
- A lack of clear internal structure and communication methods can demand lots of time and effort for mentors to navigate.
- Collaboration means all participants have “skin in the game” and can contribute brain power, shared labor, and finances, but there is work to do on internal equity.

“Artists’ passion is what is needed to guide the future.”

4. Artists Up should continue to be shaped by underserved artists’ needs and ambitious collaborative purpose. AU can continue to play a meaningful role even as change occurs in the sector. While it may well sunset after another decade, its work is not done. It is time to review and update the vision, purpose, and programs to make sure it is not “just another DEI program” but continues to boldly experiment.

We heard that:

- It is time to establish shared views on outcomes and impact and identify concepts of equity to shape future AU programming.
- Tracking and pointing to outcomes across agencies can strengthen AU’s impact.
- Artists must remain at the core: AU needs to continue to ask artists what is needed now and understand what territories underrepresented artists want to explore.
- Keep the emphasis on reaching artists from marginalized communities (though a concern was voiced about “not overdoing it”).
- AU is positioned to hold space for artists’ voices and to act on sustaining artists who want to do the work, based on what those artists define as critical needs.
- AU needs to consider how to support the virtual world dimensions of artists’ careers with equity.
- Four cornerstone aspects of AU programs should be maintained even as they evolve: 1. grants and funding; 2. mentoring; 3. gatherings; 4. research.
- Review what was heard in earlier reports and see what, besides mentoring, may be worth building on.
- There will always be a need for professional development and mentorship, but AU also needs to be something bigger.
- There are always artists starting up or stuck who can benefit from mentorship, and we will always need to find ways artists can help other artists -- mentorship is an important way for artists to ask for help and for mentors to be able to help a fellow artist.
- Bring past AU attendees, mentors, and other artists together socially and programmatically.
- Mentors see a variety of ways that AU mentorship could change or grow, including: more extended relationships/timeframe between mentor and mentee; mentorships focused on creative process; the possibility of intensive programs like Artist Trust’s defunct EDGE program;

mentor-to-mentor networking that goes beyond logistics; and various kinds of gatherings that bring together mentors and mentees.

- It is essential that AU continues experimentation.
- AU should consider how they can spread the knowledge to other artist-serving organizations, perhaps through panel trainings or other means.
- It is important to keep getting demographic info and recruit artists so AU can truly see desired changes in the applicant pool.

“Artists Up’s greatest strengths in collaboration have also been its greatest challenges.”

5. Stronger administrative systems and stable support can significantly bolster Artists Up and are essential for it to continue. There will be benefits from moving beyond its “scrappy grassroots” to integrate into agency ecosystems while retaining its unique purpose and collaborative features. Structure and sustainability need to be addressed.

We heard that:

- Artists Up needs a “real home,” or perhaps a rotating or joint but defined home, and a centralized administration.
- Top agency leadership needs to be aware, engaged, and supportive of AU with funding and staff time.
- Stronger and more comprehensive funding is essential -- it takes money to explore, expand, and innovate.
- A realistic budget is needed and should accommodate research and revisiting listening to artists.
- Budgeting is complicated and different when built on collaboration and differing resource capacities, but AU can model new approaches.
- Clearly defined roles for AU Team members are needed.
- Agencies need to give team members the time and freedom to do the work.
- The collaborative cross-agency nature of AU is a powerful aspect that models “we can work together” but also demands clear intentionality and defining of guardrails for the collaborative process.
- Mentors don’t understand where decisions come from and see the structure as being unclear and not coherent, with a changing cast of players.
- Shared leadership/equal voices remains an attractive model but needs a clearly designated lead on administration.
- Mentorship requires market rate compensation for the mentor, with appropriate paid preparation time.
- Consider a task force approach or a membership alliance of agencies, and explore ways to have other agencies/entities collaborate with Artists Up either as full team members or for specific projects or time frames.
- There are additional entities that could be considered for future alignment with AU: Shunpike ACES; getting Artist Trust back in the mix; Arts Commissions and Arts Councils from the Eastside, Spokane, and across the state; culturally specific philanthropy such as Black Future Co-op Fund; and other artist-funding organizations such as Northwest Film Forum and Jack Straw.
- AU is a very fundable project, but opportunities such as NEA (which required full matching) have been constrained by existing agency contribution levels.

“... a humbleness that does not shine light...”

“Don’t expect artists to know if the agency is changing – make it clear and evident!”

6. Artists Up needs to communicate more effectively with artists, mentors, arts administrators, and also within the participating agencies. AU benefitted from being a bit under the radar as it took shape, but at this point, this limits its capacity to effectively serve artists and activate change in the agencies, and beyond.

We heard that:

- AU needs better marketing, spreading the word of its work, and building awareness of its resources, such as the resource section of the website.
- A joint marketing and communication effort coordinated across agencies is important to build awareness.
- Mentors have little or no knowledge about the larger purpose, program, or multi-agency structure of AU so they cannot effectively represent that.
- New staff team members need an intentional orientation to the purpose and history of AU, and the cross-agency collaborative aspect, to shape their work with understanding and enthusiasm.
- There should be ways to publicly celebrate and spotlight the accomplishments of AU and the involvement of the agencies and their support of AU.
- Mentors believe there is low knowledge about AU among artists.
- AU could amplify its impact by sharing with it has learned with more artist-serving organizations.
- Communication with AU can be challenging for some mentors, and at times this has led to “email chain syndrome” and inefficient use of time.
- Mentors report seeing that selection process language has become more inclusive and transparent for participating agencies but had no way to know of the connection to the work of AU Grant LAB.
- There are opportunities to tap into social media to expand career-benefitting information beyond mentorship, such as “quick tips” and building AU as an aggregator of communication for artists
- AU can be a more known and effective “voice for artists” overall.

*“We need to celebrate and then move on to what needs to be done next...
to continue to instigate change.”*

Next Step

Artists Up is poised to chart a course for a second decade. This examination of Artists Up provides insights that can help to shape both the future of Artists Up, and illuminate how this work can have an impact beyond Artists Up’s programs. It should be kept in mind that this report was not framed as a planning process but rather to document Artists Up work to date and capture important perspectives, while raising essential questions to guide next steps. Questions of relevance were made evident through these interviews and are reflected in the findings. The following questions can help guide the process as AU embarks on the next stage of planning for the future. Some of the questions identified here are overarching “north stars” of purpose and program, while others are specific and pragmatic regarding the infrastructure and administration of AU’s work.

It is suggested that the Team consider the questions below and revise, add, or delete from the list.

Purpose and programs

1. What is AU's core intended outcome and how will it be evident when its outcome is sufficiently achieved and it is time to sunset as an initiative?
2. What programs or actions will best advance this outcome by AU, and how might this be advanced by the individual AU agencies, collaboratively or individually?
3. What are AU's program goals in service of that outcome for the next few years?
4. What outcomes and program goals are suited to meaningful experimentation and what would that look like?
5. What can AU do to ensure that its work is guided by artists' voices and needs?
6. Can mentors play a more integrated and ongoing role in keeping AU vital and connected to artist communities?
7. How can AU best leverage its assets and expertise in creating systemic change?
8. How can collaborative learning by agencies be assured and continue to advance AU outcomes?

Infrastructure and administration

9. How can the collaborative governance model be adapted for a new AU team without the same deep personal relationships as the founders?
10. How can AU balance clear roles while also embracing a collaborative governance structure?
11. Which administrative elements and program areas require greater clarity and defined processes for the AU Team to effectively function?
12. What level of commitment -- financial and other support -- from current (and potentially additional) affiliates is sufficient to move forward for 3 or more years?
13. Should AU consider expanding the affiliated agencies/entities, and if so, what might tiered or project-based affiliation look like?
14. Should AU consider becoming its own entity as a 501c3 or a fiscally sponsored project?
15. How is AU data stored, where is it housed, and what should be collected and effectively shared?

The following next steps are proposed to make use of this assessment. The information here serves as an initial step in a larger planning process for Artists Up.

- The AU Team should review this report and share with leadership from all participating agencies to help shape future planning.
- The AU Team should continue to use the data gathering aspects of the Mentorly Scholarship NEA-supported program through 2023 to inform its planning.
- Any planning should explore the four key areas of AU activity: 1. grants and funding for artists; 2. mentorship and technical assistance for artists; 3. artists' gatherings for learning and networking; 4. research or reports to document what is being learned and stimulate change through sharing.
- The AU Team and agency leadership should consider the coming year as a period to reflect on the future of this initiative, considering three divergent paths suggested by this process:
 - continuation of AU with increased clarity of purpose, program, structure and resources;
 - reconfiguration of AU through absorption and integration of purpose and programs into each agency, while retaining collaborative learning among the agencies; or
 - Sunsetting of the initiative if capacity and resources are not available to meaningfully advance its purpose as it enters its post-founder decade.

A planning process is needed to define Artist Up's path upon completion of the cycles of Mentorly Scholarships through 2023. The path ahead may require multiple plans: a collaborative AU plan as well as plans by each agency. In all cases it will be critical to identify relevant resources of staff capacity and funds, and to ensure that planning methods engage with internal and external stakeholders, especially artists, critical to the future benefits of this initiative.

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