



NEW GENERATIONS: FUTURE AUDIENCES

PROGRAM ASSESSMENT

Prepared by Anna Becker
Arts Management Resources
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New Generations: Future Audiences Program Assessment

“TCG’s New Generations: Future Audiences propelled our organization forward in ways that otherwise would not have been possible.”

– Survey Respondent

New Generations: Future Audiences

New Generations: Future Audiences was cooperatively designed by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Theatre Communications Group (TCG). The program supports the expansion and strengthening of existing theatre programs that have proven effective in reaching young and/or culturally specific audiences.

Program Assessment Objectives & Methods

The primary purpose of the New Generations: Future Audiences program assessment was to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in achieving long-term, sustainable impact on audience development activities within a not-for-profit theatre organization. Additionally, the assessment aimed to examine the program’s structure and printed materials.

A detailed online survey containing 32 questions, many of which required narrative responses in addition to multiple option selection, was sent to all organizations that received a New Generations: Future Audiences grant in Rounds One through Five. Participants in the survey were able to respond anonymously or choose to provide contact information, at their discretion. Individual responses were collected and cumulative statistics were compiled, while follow-up telephone calls and e-mail inquiries were conducted for further illumination on a variety of issues.

Survey Content & Responses

Long-term Impact

The primary emphasis of the survey was to assess the program’s overall impact and sustainability on developing (broadening, diversifying, and/or deepening) audiences. These outcomes were measured by asking respondents to rate whether they perceived that the goals of their project were achieved, whether there were long-term changes made in the organization’s external activities (such as how they communicate with their audiences and community organizations, and whether they involve their audiences in the planning of upcoming presentations), and/or long-term changes in the internal structure of the organization (such as staff restructuring, strategic planning shifts, and changes in programming and content). The other significant method for measuring long-term

sustainability was to ask if the program paved the way for other sources of funding for the same activity, or some extension of it. These points combined to provide a reasonable context for assessing the long-term impact of the program; if a large number of survey participants responded that their goals had been reasonably met, that they had made long-term changes that extended beyond the grant period, and that they had obtained funding from other sources to continue the work, it would be reasonable to assume that the program was able to have significant, sustainable impact on the organizations' audience development activities.

We sent the survey to 67 previous Future Audiences grantees from Rounds One through Five and received 31 (47%) responses. We conducted follow-up telephone conversations with six of these respondents. The survey responses provided generally consistent feedback overall: 79% stated that their goals were entirely or almost entirely met; 76% have made long-term changes in their relationships with other organizations in the community; 69% have significantly changed the way that they communicate with their audiences; 65% have changed their staff structure; 58% have made changes in their strategic planning and priorities; and an impressive 82% stated that the program paved the way for other sources of funding.

Program Structure

Another goal of the survey was to assess the program's overall structure. Specifically, we sought to discover whether the program activities were properly supported financially, if the written and interpersonal communications were effective, and if the selection process was clear, thorough, and fair. In addition to the 31 grantee responses, we sought responses from 56 former New Generations panelists and 39 (70%) completed the survey. We made follow-up phone calls to three of these panelist-respondents, to provide another lens on this set of information.

The survey responses showed that 82% of the grantee-respondents regarded the funds provided for program activities as sufficient, and 72% held that the timeframe for completion of the program was appropriate. We asked former grantees a wide range of questions, including the appropriateness of timing and content of the program guidelines and application form. Responses ranged from 86% to 96% positive. Of the 39 panelists surveyed, 97% to 100% found the guidelines and application form to be clear and comprehensive.

The Value of Networking

Another area of investigation contained in the survey focused on the value of disseminating and sharing experiences and lessons learned from the program. An overwhelming 93% of all respondents stated a strong belief that communication amongst grantees and the larger not-for-profit theatre community is vital to the evolution of the field. This commitment was further evidenced by 97% of respondents stating their willingness to volunteer their time in an ongoing manner to participate in a wide range of

information-sharing methods such as roundtable meetings, breakout sessions at the TCG conference, teleconferences, e-chats and other forms of communication.

Differing Opinions

Differing opinions for the above information represented a small percentage, or one to three respondents in total. None of these responses suggested that the program was ineffective or of little value. Rather, they were centered on the belief that the program should be extended to a three-year period (or that an extension for a third year should be made possible in certain cases), or that grant amounts should be increased in order to enhance the benefits of the program. There was uniform agreement that the New Generations: Future Audiences program is a visionary and highly important program for the overall survival and growth of the not-for-profit theatre field.

Conclusion

The New Generations: Future Audiences program assessment survey found that there was widely-held high regard for the program amongst its participants. Survey responses served primarily to illuminate the many and varied long-term benefits and positive outcomes of the program. Although there were a few recommendations for changes in the structure of the program in terms of timeframe and grant size, the vast majority of survey respondents found the program to be extremely well-constructed and administered.

New Generations: Future Audiences Program Assessment Detailed Findings

Introduction

Survey Responses for the New Generations: Future Audiences program assessment were uniformly positive, with not a single response suggesting that the program is in any way ineffective or unimportant. There were no recommendations for significant program overhaul, nor were there any major indications of concern regarding the administration of the program.

While the results show no cause for significant re-evaluation of the program, there was uniformity in many responses that can serve to provide a deeper understanding of how and why the program is working. Therefore, this report will primarily aid in validating and deepening our regard and knowledge of the program and its impact.

Profile of Survey Respondents

We received 31 completed surveys from groups that present a wide range of productions, 94% of which are new works. 90% of respondents were from urban organizations and 61% of them produce plays that are political or social in nature for student/youth audiences. At least two-thirds of respondents had completed the program from 2006 through 2008. Respondent's project goals were evenly spread between diversifying, broadening, and deepening their audience base.

Assessment Methods

The survey asked participants about their methods for assessing results. This question was posed to gain a sense of how theatres are gathering audience information and what level of verifiability is contained in these measures. This information was considered important both to assess the objective reliability of responses, and to ascertain whether more sophisticated assessment tools might be worthy of further cultivation in the field.

A large majority of respondents are relying on a combination of independently verifiable information - in the form of audience surveys and a statistical comparison of box office statements - and subjective evaluation such as anecdotal information and general audience observation. The responses suggest that information is being gathered in a layered and comprehensive manner.

Assessment Conclusions

Based upon the above methods of assessment, when asked to rate on a scale of one to five whether the project's stated objectives had been met (one = did not meet goals at all, 5 = met goals entirely), 79% rated it a five or four, and the remaining 21% rated it a three. These results suggest that a vast majority of grantees were largely successful in achieving the kind of audience development they originally targeted. As further evidence of this

conclusion, 81% of respondents stated that their goals regarding their targeted audiences did not change significantly during the grant program timeframe.

Long-term Impact

“In large part it is due to the support of TCG that has made possible our work in a comprehensive network of producing organizations and allowed us access to funders, artists, and audiences. We have been able to leverage the multi-year support, and the commitment that this support implies to create a genuine excitement and buzz surrounding the work we do and to solidify [our] audience base. At the end of TCG support, we were able to take our work onto a national stage.”

- Survey Respondent

The survey sought to assess the long-term impact of the New Generations: Future Audiences program from multiple perspectives by asking : (1) if lasting changes were made to their external activities; (2) if lasting changes were made to their internal activities; (3) what enduring lessons, if any, were learned during the program timeframe; (4) whether the program paved the way for other sources of funding to continue the program activities; and (5) whether there were any unexpected outcomes from the grant. In addition, follow-up telephone calls focused heavily on the aftermath of the grant period.

One telephone interviewee summed up the value of the program in achieving sustainable impact as follows:

“Even if the activities only last for the grant period, it changes the way you think about audience development. Also, a specific strategy developed during the grant period (e.g. internet marketing) may no longer be implemented, but some future incarnation of it is, since trends change so quickly. So the long-term impact may not look the same, but it’s there.”

Another telephone interviewee echoed these sentiments about the enduring foundation that the program helps to build:

“We are doing better during this economic crisis than we would have because of the partnerships and the stable base we’ve developed as a result of the grant program.”

Long-Term Changes to External Activities

Three significant methods of audience development were identified as the most effective, resulting in long-term changes to external activities. The most significant of these was the cultivation of relationships with other organizations in the community. Fully 76% of respondents stated that building partnerships with communities such as schools, special interest groups, and community centers reaped the greatest result in terms of audience

attendance. Respondents also noted that these relationship-building activities are continuing beyond the grant program timeframe.

One example of the long-term success of community partnerships came from a telephone interviewee that told of her company's work with young audiences. As part of the grant program activities, the company reached out to develop a relationship with the Department of Health. As a result, the company now has a contract to perform short skits on a variety of health issues before and after their regular performances. This new partnership – now in its third year - brings the company approximately \$100,000 annually. The interviewee stated that it would not have occurred to them to seek this partnership had it not been for the New Generations: Future Audiences grant.

Following closely behind partnership-building, 69% of respondents have changed the method with which it communicates with its audiences. A large majority of these responses focused on a variety of internet communications such as e-blasts, social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace), web site enhancement, and so forth. New media marketing (video postcards, texting, twitter.com) was identified as crucial in reaching younger audiences.

Another significant development in communications with audience members was the addition of activities that increase audience access to the artistic process, such as involvement in the artistic planning process, post-performance discussions, workshops, and panel discussions.

Long-Term Changes to Internal Activities

Three primary areas of lasting change in the internal activities of respondent organizations were identified. Most significantly 65% of respondents stated long-term changes in their organizational structure, specifically staffing. In most cases, this means that the company has added one to two full-time audience development staff members.

Changes in an organization's strategic planning and organizational priorities were made by 58% of respondents, primarily consisting of a stated commitment to outreach to targeted audiences and community organizations, as discussed above. One telephone interviewee told me how his company now creates a marketing roadmap for every production. Instead of continuing its old strategy of institutional marketing, the grant program activities proved that marketing on a per show basis - starting from scratch every time – is much more successful for them. They have moved away from institutional branding and now work closely with their artists to discover what it is they are trying to express, and who they want to reach.

More than half of the respondents indicated that the company's programming goals have changed as a result of the program. In this case, theatres are looking at what populations they want to reach as an organic and integral part of the programming process. Prior to their participation in Future Audiences, programming was selected on the basis of other criteria, and audience development was considered long after programming decisions

were made. In a follow-up telephone call, one grantee talked about her theatre's programming and content changes. This company found that their target audiences – younger and diverse populations - came to shows when the programming reflected them. Therefore, they now think about programming in terms of who they want to draw, instead of implementing a slick marketing campaign on the back-end.

Lessons Learned

Many of the lessons learned by our survey respondents can be easily isolated into four distinct categories: (1) Partnerships in the community are essential to attracting and growing audiences; (2) programming decisions must be made with the theatre's community in mind and, in many cases, with the community's participation; (3) very specific targeted-marketing is crucial; and (4) added access to the artistic process is a significant attractor.

One other important realization that continually emerged in specific response to our question about lessons learned was that the above categories require a great deal of time and staff resources. Many respondents stated that, if they could start the program over, they would have at least one full-time staffer dedicated to these activities. One respondent said: *“One thing we did not calculate correctly was the intense amount of staff time it would take to build and maintain the number of relationships we took on. If we were doing things differently, we would restructure staff functions on the front end to account for this. However, as a result of doing the grant activities, we have restructured on the back end to make the efforts sustainable.”* Similarly, another respondent said: *“In hindsight, going into the program with a keener sense that depth and not volume was a key to our success, could have started with that as a key focus.”*

Financial Sustainability

Survey results suggest that the Future Audiences program activities became financially sustainable through a variety of means. Fully 82% of respondents stated that the grant program activities paved the way for other sources of funding. In some cases, this was a result of the “seal of approval” that goes along with receiving a prestigious Future Audiences grant, and in other cases funding was secured because the grant provided theatres with the time and resources to create a stable, grant-worthy model. Also, as outlined in the Department of Health example above, the partnerships developed during the grant program had a variety of positive financial outcomes. Another telephone interviewee told of her company's ability to find a home for its productions, free of charge, after renting in various locations for its entire existence. In addition to the financial freedom of being in residence at no charge, the company now has a consistent physical presence which has increased its audience attendance considerably. The ability to be in residence at another facility was a result of a partnership they had built during the grant period. In this way, some positive results continue to build upon themselves.

Unexpected Outcomes

Many of the survey responses regarding unexpected outcomes are covered above, including the importance of partnerships, alternative marketing methods, and new sources of support. Other unexpected outcomes included the attraction of new board members, staff, and artists to the grantees as a result of their focused, in-depth efforts to reach specific communities. Here again, these outcomes point to the long-term impact that participation in the New Generations: Future Audiences program can generate.

Guidelines and Structure

The survey quite clearly showed that New Generations: Future Audiences grantees approve overall of the program's guidelines. Positive responses with respect to the timing of the application and award, and the appropriateness of the application questions ranged from 86% to 96%. 100% of all respondents found the program's matching requirements to be clear and attainable.

With respect to the program's award amount and timeframe, there were some suggestions for change. 28% of respondents felt that the program timeframe was too short and 18% stated that the funds were insufficient to support the program activities.

The following quotes from survey respondents illuminate their concerns about the program's two-year timeframe.

“The New Generations program was a tremendous support for our audience development goals, and effective. However, it took us at least one year to implement plans and then assess which approaches worked and which needed re-thinking. We were on a roll when the funding stopped. It would be great if the program lasted a little longer, perhaps one more year, in order to really be effective and solid.”

“Two years was not enough to determine outcomes and procure replacement funds. Funds were a great size, but led the organization to places it wanted to go without future resources to fully realize them.”

“I would recommend a third year – creating a new audience is like getting a ball rolling – a process of developing and then sustaining momentum. In some cases we found our outreach plans required more effort, or different approaches, to spark the interest that would grow audiences.”

In a telephone interview, one grantee suggested that a pool of money be set aside for those grantees that find that they are onto something important at the end of the two year period, and need a little more time to implement it. This suggestion involves the ability to request an extension in a streamlined manner so that the project's momentum doesn't get slowed down by waiting for approval in a new grant cycle.

Supporting the above recommendations, two respondents that have participated in the program for two rounds stated that the second grant was more successful because they had learned a great deal from the first round and could build upon that.

The above concerns about timeframe are worthy of consideration. This consideration should be balanced with the knowledge that a great many of the survey respondents cited specific examples of how their activities in the two-year timeframe reaped sustainable benefits via other sources of funding, internal and external restructuring, community partnerships, and more. Thus, the possibility of an extension, rather than a wholesale shift to a longer timeframe, would seem more appropriate.

The Value of Information-Sharing

“The exit meeting of all grantees (2 years later) had a significant impact on our analysis of outcome and current practices. I would have loved to see these types of opportunities included as part of the program structure on a more consistent basis.”

When asked whether it would be important to find methods for sharing and disseminating experiences and lessons learned from the program, 93% of respondents responded positively. In follow-up telephone calls, this sentiment was echoed repeatedly, with several interviewees citing the significant value of the exit meeting in 2006.

A number of methods for information-sharing were offered in the survey, as well as an open-ended box for suggestions from respondents. While all methods were viewed as valuable, two rose to the top: 82% of respondents selected roundtable meetings with other grantees, and 50% selected open breakout sessions at the TCG national conference. 39% of respondents selected teleconferences with other grantees and the creation of a Future Audiences blog that allows for multiple writers.

The importance of information sharing is perhaps best evidenced by 97% of respondents stating their willingness to volunteer their time to support the above activities

Open-Ended Responses and Recommendations

The survey asked respondents to offer, in an open-ended format, any suggestions or comments about the Future Audiences program. The goal was to provide the opportunity for survey participants to discuss any aspect of the program that had not been raised in earlier questions, or to elaborate upon any answers they had provided.

A total of 17 responses were entered for this question. The vast majority of responses were affirmations of the great value of the program, reiterations of the various benefits of the program as discussed above, and notes of gratitude. There were no significant suggestions or comments other than those already detailed.

Conclusion

Without question, the New Generations: Future Audiences survey results show that the program is widely held to be an extremely valuable and well-constructed program.

The most successful methods of audience development were identified as: the development of partnerships within the community, audience-targeted programming, targeted marketing efforts, and expanded access to the artistic process. It was noted that these methods require a significant investment of time and attention. Survey responses also made a strong case for the addition of information-sharing activities amongst grantees and the field at large.