



FLEISHER ART MEMORIAL

APRIL 2011

New Community Engagement Strategies to Bridge Participation Gaps for Southeast Philadelphia Residents

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

The Fleisher Art Memorial has made significant investments in its ability to understand the composition and motivations of its current audience and future participant groups in Southeast Philadelphia through onsite and community-centered audience research. This three-year initiative was made possible by a \$370,000 Excellence Award from the Wallace Foundation in 2008. Fleisher was intent on using the research to fuel an organization-wide process to transform and strengthen management capacity and develop training and pilot programs to advance community engagement competencies among the staff and board, such as cultural awareness and partnership building skills. The results of these efforts led to expansion of the scope of existing programming, and the design of new initiatives that will support Fleisher's community engagement goals to progressively increase participation by targeted stakeholders over the coming years.

RECOGNIZING OUR CHALLENGE

Overall audience participation in Fleisher's on-site programming has not reflected the significant demographic shifts that have occurred over the past forty years in the neighborhoods adjacent and immediately south of Fleisher. Rooted in Fleisher's history and commitment to the residents of Southeast Philadelphia neighborhoods that were at the heart of Sam Fleisher's vision, it was necessary for Fleisher to return its attention to the demographic make-up of its participant base, and use community engagement strategies to help close the gap between current participation rates and projected demographic composition. Projected double-digit percentage population growth over the next five years among Asian and Hispanic residents, and substantial growth among the African American population in Southeast Philadelphia was Fleisher's wake-up call. Fleisher's goal, therefore, was to increase awareness about and participation in its available programs and resources among these communities who are not proportionally represented within its current participant base.

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM OUR COMMUNITY

Fleisher contracted with the Chicago firm Slover Linett Strategies to develop a multi-stage, community-focused research plan. This plan was designed to specifically learn the attitudes and perceptions of Fleisher's current students; to understand the barriers to formal cultural participation for non-participants and their perceptions of creative practice; and to shed light on the degree to which target audiences were or were not aware of Fleisher and its programs. This was accomplished using focus groups with current students and prospective participants; interviews with community leaders; residential exploration, and neighborhood based interviews. (Repeat surveys and focus groups will be conducted in 2012.)

Several core findings emerged from this research that confirmed and quantified the low participation rates among low-income minority and immigrant residents from target neighborhoods. Overall, target residents possessed a low level of awareness about Fleisher and its programs, and those who were aware had ambivalent or misinformed perceptions. Target community members perceived art and creativity as beneficial, particularly for young people and elders, however Fleisher's offerings only partially overlapped with their creative priorities and preferences. Finally, additional barriers to participation include language and cultural challenges, concerns over family safety, and time and logistical constraints.

The link between the research findings and Fleisher's programmatic development strategies became defined by three core themes: "Come to us," "Show us," and "Welcome us."

HOW WE PLAN TO PUT IT TO WORK

To fulfill the calls-to-action inherent in these themes, Fleisher had to reinvent the programming that was originally proposed to be carried out as a result of the Wallace-funded research. At the onset of the initiative, Fleisher assumed that new, free after school programming, full-day summer programs, and multiple weekend family festivals would provide the appropriate program platforms with which to engage new participants. However, based on the detailed findings embedded in the "Come to us," "Show us," and "Welcome us" themes, a new strategy was crafted that changed the way in which Fleisher will prepare and roll-out new programming in 2011. The new approach began with the development of a community engagement curriculum and organization-wide professional development; new programming that embeds Fleisher more deeply in the daily lives of Southeast Philadelphia residents; and new on-site course offerings that better meet the social and cultural needs of our target populations.