



Columbus Ohio's Arts Ecosystem

Rachel Skaggs and Amanda Tobin Ripley

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A strong arts and creative industry in Columbus is important for supporting the creative and working lives of artists within the city. Careers in the arts are fundamentally precarious for individual artists¹. However, research increasingly suggests that artistic communities, whether based in shared geographic context or shared artistic goals, provide better opportunities for individual artists to create stronger, more sustainable careers and benefit their surrounding communities². We set out to understand Columbus's arts ecosystem and the needs that artists and arts leaders suggest are present and are lacking in this community. Based on the concept of a natural, biological ecosystem, industrial or business ecosystems are metaphorical frameworks for understanding complex social and economic systems³. Toward this aim, we conducted interviews and focus groups with local artists and arts leaders. In conducting this work, we hope to be able to identify Columbus's most useful programs, resources, and pathways for artists and identify areas of weakness in the local arts ecosystem. Through this process, we hope to provide information that helps artists, arts leaders, and The Ohio State University to make informed investments in the local arts ecosystem, whether those investments be monetary, social, infrastructure, time, or other assets.

The word "artist" means different things to different people. Despite the word "artist" conjuring specific images in the public's imagination, evoking someone, often someone famous, who creates or performs art as a professional, many artists have a multidisciplinary practice⁴, hold side jobs or multiple roles in their work that span creative and non-creative work⁵, and are often teachers of art, arts administrators, or hobbyists rather than only seeking to work professionally in the arts.⁶ One of the important takeaways from focus groups was the challenge of defining what an artist is⁷, which then leads to challenges in identifying what artists might need in a healthy arts ecosystem. For example, someone who sees being an artist as a career might purport to have different needs from someone who sees it as a way of life, as a hobby, or as a tool for social change.

Throughout this report, we define artist broadly, inclusive of people who work to create, perform, teach, and administer or hold managerial roles in the arts and creative industries. A visual artist from our focus groups posed the following thought:

"Would you define [your art] as your career? You know, your job? A kind way of living your life? Or lifestyle? I think it's really hard to define those things, and because so many artists are working for free—or actually not working for free but are working at a financial expense to be an artist. I think that complicates it even more. Many artists are many different things."

¹ (Lingo and Tepper 2013; Menger 1999)

² (Cornfield 2015; Farrell 2003; Lena 2012)

³ (Korhonen 2001; Tsujimoto et al. 2018)

⁴ (Frenette, Martin, and Tepper 2018)

⁵ (Chong 2021)

⁶ (Novak-Leonard and Skaggs 2017; Skaggs et al. 2017)

⁷ After our first focus group and first few interviews with arts leaders, we began interviews by saying, "Throughout this interview, we ask about "artists" and we realize that means something different to people in various arts and creative industries. We will leave it to you to define artists as it best relates to your work."

We found this line of thought to ring true throughout our research process. Artists in Columbus, Ohio are many things. Some pursue art as a career, some engage in art primarily as a way to be in community with others, many are creating and performing art without a significant monetary return, and on the whole, Columbus artists are a diverse group whose needs are likewise diverse. As one arts leader stated in an interview, a diversity of goals across Columbus-based artists means that a diversity of resources is needed to facilitate their success. He posed the question: *“So what would be the thing to offer that would start to open up opportunities for people to take all different paths?”* An expansive understanding of artists and their pathways has direct implications on our approach to reporting what resources local artists need to be successful.

We interviewed 15 arts leaders, individuals whose work includes leadership, administration, and management of artists and the arts in Columbus and for Ohio more broadly. Their titles include executive director, commissioner, artistic director, grants manager, founder, and they span involvement in arts broadly, including work across all arts disciplines and work in music, film, visual art, writing, illustration, theatre, and more. We also conducted five focus groups made up of 29 total artists across visual arts, music, theatre, writing, and community building⁸. In these recorded virtual meetings, we posed questions to participants and reflected on their experiences pursuing art while living in Columbus.

In over twenty hours of talking with Columbus-based artists and arts leaders, we observed a number of broad themes. Three of these themes emerged as the most prevalent and cross-cutting among artists and arts leaders across disciplines, career stages, and socio-demographic characteristics: need for community building, lack of paid work, and access to space.

What Columbus-Based Artists Have and What They Need

Broadly, we asked artists and arts leaders about their needs for and access to various resources in their arts work in Columbus⁹. While the greatest needs of the Columbus arts community that were identified in this study are detailed in the three themes below, artists and arts leaders also outlined the broad web of support that Columbus-based artists have access to. Institutionally, Columbus has a strong local arts ecosystem, with a forward-thinking local arts agency that provides a significant number and type of grants to local artists across disciplines. Likewise, the number and breadth of non-profit organizations in Columbus centered around artists, their work, and their wellbeing is a strength of this city’s arts ecosystem.

Participants cited the Greater Columbus Arts Council (GCAC) as a pillar of support within the Columbus arts ecosystem. Every focus group and nearly every arts leader interview mentioned the GCAC resources without fail, highlighting in particular the non-competitive grants they offer to practicing artists. While some participants lamented the relatively small award amount and the need for more effective communication about the grant and whom it serves, the overwhelming majority expressed how vital GCAC is to their artistic practice in Columbus.¹⁰

Additional anchor institutions that support Columbus artists tended to vary depending on artistic medium. Public libraries and coffee shops like Parable Coffee, Kafe Kerouac, and Two Dollar Radio were essential for poets and writers, as was the Thurber House organization. Visual artists cited small artist-run galleries, like the Columbus Printed Arts Center, Vanderelli Room, dreamspace project clinic, Chromedge Studios, and No Place

⁸ We defined “community builders” as those within the artistic community across disciplines who are actively working to build organizations, including both established not-for-profits and informal artist-run projects, to support Columbus-area artists.

⁹ Appendix A details the results of a series of surveys of participants regarding the financial services and professional development services most needed by artists who participated in the focus groups and of the services that arts leaders identified as being potentially most useful for the kinds of artists they work for. Appendix B details discipline-specific needs across the discipline-specific focus groups.

¹⁰ Appendix C lists other non-Columbus arts resources that artists and arts leaders cited as useful during our research.

Gallery, alongside more established arts organizations, such as the Wexner Center for the Arts, Riffe Gallery, Wild Goose Creative, Roy G. Biv Gallery, Urban Arts Space, and IDEA Foundry. Theatre artists likewise highlighted a range of smaller organizations, like Available Light Theatre, MadLab, and evolution theatre co., as well as the larger organizations such as Short North Stage, Columbus Association for the Performing Arts, The Contemporary Theatre of Ohio (formerly CATCO), BalletMet, and Lincoln Theatre. Musicians pointed first to the Columbus Music Commission as well as to university spaces (Capital University, Otterbein University, and The Ohio State University), local churches, Ginger Rabbit Jazz Lounge, the Jazz Arts Group, and the Columbus Symphony Orchestra. Filmmakers cited the Columbus Film Commission and the Gateway Film Center as important hubs.

Community Building

Despite many useful and important resources and organizations already available to artists in Columbus, a lack of cross-pollination and communication within and across arts disciplines limits who can access resources and opportunities. Throughout this research, there was significant discussion of the idea that Columbus has, at best, a decentralized set of artistic communities. Once theatre artist summed up his perspective, saying, *“I don't think that as Columbus artists we know how to be a community,”* while another described the Columbus arts community as *“different pockets that don't always know anything about each other.”* These “insular pockets”, “cliques”, “silos”, “niches”, “subgroups”, and “fractures” that artists identified exist, according to them, along a number of meaningful lines: between arts disciplines within Columbus, between those affiliated with colleges and universities and those who are not, and between Columbus and other cities or centers of cultural production in the United States.

One artist who is nationally prominent but still does not feel connected to the Columbus arts community despite living in Columbus for almost 10 years says, *“I just feel like I wish that I knew a better way to tap into the creative core of the city.”* Another artist from the music focus group indicated that there is *“the idea of inclusion”* but that it is unclear *“how deep that runs.”* A key need identified consistently across all interviews and focus groups is the need for spaces, gatherings, and relationships that allow natural, informal community-building to take place. Artists in some focus groups pushed back at the idea of formal mixers, but others felt that networking events, especially events that bring together members of different artistic disciplines and communities, would generate conversation, relationship building, resource and opportunity sharing, mentorship, and collaboration.

“It's really actually the community building opportunities that are accessible, are free, and are spaces where real community can be built [that I want], not something that feels fake or difficult to navigate. Like I want to be in discussion with other people, and so I'm looking for places to have conversations with other people and figure out from there how we can mentor each other, how we can build artist residency opportunities for each other, how we can get teaching opportunities, how we can build skills.”

“What I would love to see is event support in multiple ways, because I think that it could be really valuable. I think the most valuable thing creatives can do is get together with people that do similar things to what they do, share resources, and create a scene and cross-pollinate ideas, as well as share opportunities.”

“I'm not going to help you at my own expense, and I'm not in a position where I can help you at my own expense, right? Because everybody is struggling for the same little bit of resources.”

Building community among artists is a good investment in the social infrastructure of the arts. By connecting artists, arts managers, teachers of art, and others interested in the arts, more resources, like knowledge about resources, opportunities for collaboration, and sharing ideas can more easily take place. A participant in the music focus group puts this well, saying, “*The more we get together, the more we unite, the more we do things together, the better because there's more resources and there's more way[s] of giving solutions to problems.*” While some Columbus-based artists said that they find the city to have a collaborative arts environment, like the one promoted by the music artist above, many others felt that in their experience things are more competitive than collaborative, particularly because of the perception that there are not enough resources and paid work to go around. Artistic occupational communities often rely on extensive social networking and mutual support to create and share opportunities, develop skills, and collaborate¹¹. These kinds of reciprocity, when built into artistic communities, contribute to social capital, which can promote improvement of economic and social outcomes for community members and ensures more efficient use of resources within the community¹².

Lack of Paid Work

Across all focus groups, artists told us that it is not necessarily a lack of funds that limits their art, but a lack of paid opportunities. There are an abundance of unpaid work and “opportunities” that artists are asked to engage in for free, so ultimately, people are given the opportunity to be exploited for their work. It's possible that opportunities to show their work for free may help them in terms of exposure, however exposure does not pay the bills. One writer says, “*We're self-financing the art in the country. Like we're taking from our pockets by using our own resources to make the art.*” Artists in Columbus are mostly creating and performing their work for rates below market value or for free.

The perception of who is a so-called starving artist and who is able to financially make do with their art is more complicated than it might appear at first. We certainly heard from artists who hold ongoing side jobs and primary jobs outside of their art, or even outside of the arts altogether. According to the people we spoke with for this study, very few artists in Columbus are able to make their living wholly through creating or performing art. Most research participants in this study have compiled other ways of securing healthcare and income, like being supported by their spouses, picking up non-arts gigs, or through full time work in other industries. A very successful theatre artist, in terms of her credits and long-standing role as a leader and mentor in Columbus's theatre scene says, “*I have been a professional artist full-time for 20 years in Columbus, but my husband [has a stable professional job], so when it comes to what resources I have, I have him. He's like, one of the biggest benefactors of the arts that nobody ever recognizes in a program. I don't think I've made over \$22,000 in any given year. So there have been times when I get a new car that I'm not even sure I could afford to live in my car.*” The ways that local artists make a living vary substantially, but only a very small minority of Columbus-based artists can make a living from their art alone.

“For example, the show we just closed, in that rehearsal room. There's me. I have a full-time job at a theater. I have one of the few ones in town, right? Our stage manager is a middle school art teacher. The assistant stage manager is an accountant. The lead actors, one of them is like a personal assistant dog walker, piecing life together that way. Another one works at a pet store during the day in retail...The other folks in that [show], somebody works at a salad place. Somebody else drives for Uber. Someone's a drag performer, who makes a decent amount of income as a drag performer. Our music director has a full-time job at a church running music and other various programs. The choreographer is in development at the Wexner Medical Center, and that's her full-time job.”

¹¹ (Frenette 2017; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; Scott 2012)

¹² (Anheier, Gerhards, and Romo 1995; Coleman 1988; Dowd and Pinheiro 2013)

According to our participants, though there is a lot of unpaid or volunteer arts work happening in Columbus, there is also a significant amount of underpayment. Many arts leaders and some focus group participants noted that they always try to pay artists or raise artists' pay rates at their organizations, even if it is a small sum. Some organizational leaders reported that they are proud of themselves for advocating for even nominal increases to the rates they pay artists year-over-year. Even if they can only raise the rate by ten dollars, they are adamant about rates not being symbolically stagnant. Despite the potential implication that artists would just want money or funding for their work, one local arts grantor found that not to be the case. When her organization talked to grantees about their needs, the organization expected to be asked for more money but found overwhelmingly that artists wanted opportunities for fairly paid work.

A frequent response across the United States when artists ask for more paid work opportunities is to suggest that artists act entrepreneurially to create their own opportunities¹³. Many Columbus artists are certainly acting entrepreneurially, but to be an effective entrepreneur takes additional time, training, and personal capacity. One arts leader reflects this reality, telling us, *“You have to be an entrepreneur; you have to be your own manager. You have to be your own curator. You have to be all these different things and there's no knowledge of that process. And it's learned, but you have to hit your head against a wall to figure that out. I think that's an issue.”* Many arts organizations across Columbus are trying to help artists act more entrepreneurially through workshops on whether and how to set up a nonprofit, contract review, social media marketing, and other skills that are essential today. It is important for local artists to learn entrepreneurial skills and be able to use these skills, however, it is important to point out that attaining these skills and using them takes time away from artists' primary role of creating or performing art.

Even if you did [get social media training] though, you can't just—I mean some people can go viral right away—but you can't just turn on TikTok and have a huge following. You have the beast; you have to feed it, or it dies. The idea I'm heading toward is that that's a job, that's a whole other job and skill set other than being an artist. It is a part-time job to be your own self-promoter. It's just a whole 'nother job, the self-promotion and the marketing. And it's not just about knowledge and expertise. I do know this stuff, but I don't want to spend 12 hours a day feeding the beast.

Unfortunately, in the Columbus arts ecosystem a lack of paid work for artists is coupled with a lack of infrastructure in at least some areas of the arts. In particular, artists and arts leaders from music, film, and theatre were especially vocal about the lack of the kinds of infrastructure that would create and sustain paid work in these disciplines. A leader in Columbus's music scene tells us, *“There's no record company here. There's no managers here. There's no publishers here. There's no dedicated music lawyers.”* Likewise, in film and in theatre, arts leaders tell us bluntly that there is no infrastructure for steady paid work or opportunity for large projects. Leaders and artists tell us that there have been some exceptions, in the form of films or large investments in these sectors, but generally the lack of infrastructure is stifling to these areas of the arts and leads to Columbus-based artists in these fields moving elsewhere to pursue their work. Together, the challenges of little paid work and lacking infrastructure are continual factors in Columbus losing artists to other cities or to other, non-arts paid employment.

¹³ (Essig 2015; Wyszomirski and Chang 2017)

Access to Space

While many artists can do their work, or some aspect of their work, in their homes or in public spaces like libraries or coffee shops, many artists brought up space as a primary concern. This is not necessarily a new problem; one arts administrator told us that space has “*been on [her] radar for years.*” Despite the longstanding nature of this problem, space has become more expensive and difficult to access since the onset of the pandemic. Home prices and rent are rising, as are the prices and rents for commercial buildings. Participants spoke of the studio spaces at 400 West Rich as a formerly important space, which is now sadly out of reach for many artists and arts organizations since a recent raise in rent of 300% announced this year amidst a rapidly gentrifying Franklinton arts district.

Visual artists told us that there are very few affordable studio spaces, which are especially necessary for artists who make large artistic work, use specialized equipment like kilns or welding setups, or need to have excellent storage and ventilation for hazardous materials like paints, silica, and solvents. A garage studio may not have the electrical capacity for a kiln, and an artist whose work involves solvents may be unwilling to use these materials to create art in a home that they share with their children. Likewise, artists who work in music in Columbus also have trouble finding space to create and perform their work. One leader spoke of it as a lack of “*gathering places*” that could be used to co-write music or rehearse music. Some theatre artists found it difficult to find places to run lines or practice for auditions, while others say that finding space to create and store scenery and costumes is difficult and becoming more difficult.

The barriers are still very high for entry in terms of having space where you're not breaking the law, where the police are not being called on you frequently, where it's not a condemned building.

What I believe [is needed] next is subsidized studio and rehearsal space. Because the art has to be created. The art has to be nurtured and it's a disincentive, it's a barrier when you have no place to rehearse, or your neighbors are banging on the walls.

Many artists have found spaces to share with others through their existing community and networks, again emphasizing the importance of breaking down silos and building community among artists. One artist said, “*it's interesting how artists have continuously found little nooks and crannies to have their spaces and artists then recommend places to other artists.*” Some of the spaces that the participants in this study have found include small garages or industrial buildings to rent or using church space for free or at a reduced cost. Rather than finding and negotiating over nooks and crannies, Columbus-based artists need access to reliable and suitably priced spaces that meet the specialized needs of artistic work.

What are the Arts Ecosystems Like in Columbus, Ohio?

Artists and arts leaders brought up a number of comparator cities throughout this research. They mentioned these cities primarily in comparison to Columbus to highlight needs that are not met for artists here in Columbus. Based on these findings, which we detail below, we have developed a more nuanced typology of what kind of city Columbus is and could be in terms of its function as an arts ecosystem. Columbus is not New York, Chicago, or even Cleveland, but that does not preclude it from being a city that has a strong arts ecosystem. Just like in nature, healthy ecosystems don't all look the same. The world is not only rainforests, coral reefs, savannas, or deserts. Diversity across ecosystems is important, too.

What does this mean for Columbus if its ecosystem is not like that of Nashville, Pittsburgh, or Cincinnati? What would a healthy Columbus arts ecosystem look like? What impact do the need for community, paid work opportunities, and space do to the Columbus arts ecosystem? As it stands, our research has shown that Columbus is most successful in creating two distinct ecosystems for working artists, as launchpad and as homebase. Columbus's extensive array of local higher education institutions graduates hundreds of trained young artists annually, many of whom have to or choose to leave Columbus to start their careers, making it a launchpad for artistic careers. Columbus is also home to a number of artists who periodically leave Columbus for tours, shows, and other aspects of their paid artistic work but make a home and identity in Columbus, making it a homebase from which these artists base their careers. Columbus is also home to numerous artists who choose to work and live here, but as we report, those artists have significant unmet needs that keep them from thriving as artists.

How to Support Artists As a Launchpad

We found that one characteristic of Columbus's arts ecosystem acts as a launchpad. The quality, variety, and scope of collegiate art education spans multiple colleges and universities, graduate and undergraduate education, a broad array of arts disciplines, and a good mix of institution types, from a comprehensive research university to small universities like to an arts-specific college. This aspect of Columbus's arts ecosystem means both that there are relatively many jobs teaching higher education in the arts and that the city educates many young artists.

“For me, it almost feels like the music scene in Columbus is almost like a starting point. I have a lot of friends who, they'll start here, they'll go through like these jazz programs, go to college maybe. And right after that, like the first thing is like, ‘Oh, I want to get out of Columbus,’ or really just get out of Ohio. And I think that's partially because there there's just not a whole lot of opportunities. And it also seems like, you know, what opportunities there are, it's very hard for younger people like myself and my friends to get into what's already been established.”

Those research participants affiliated with institutions of higher education, like The Ohio State University (OSU), Columbus College of Art & Design (CCAD), Otterbein, and others felt more connected and in community with one another. However, those not affiliated or no longer affiliated with one of these institutions felt the social distance. One participant in the community building focus group shared, *“I'm not affiliated with OSU. It's a bit of a lonely experience really.”* Others mentioned that many of the silos in Columbus's arts ecosystem are institutional silos build up around these higher education institutions. One artist who recently moved back to Columbus after time away says, *“the overwhelming sort of sense that we got when we were moving back here and...trying to get to our lay of the land was that the art community was divided into sections [that were] institution-specific. So the people from OSU mostly knew the people from OSU and the people from CCAD mostly knew the people from CCAD.”*

A practical implication of these silos is not just that some artists in town gain an education, it also means that the artists who are or were affiliated with these institutions have greater access to resources like campus spaces and tools through alumni networks, friendships, and knowledge gained at their institution. This access, even if off-the-books, can persist after graduation further privileging artists who are already connected to more advantaged communities. One arts leader who has affiliations with OSU tells us, *“Once you're in academia, or once you're in the OSU community, there's so many resources, there's so many opportunities, so much*

validation, accreditation, because the what's attached to your degree or to your title, right, or what have you.” He goes on that people with such institutional affiliations, “do get into places. You do get more referrals. You have access to, you know, tons of tools and technologies at your disposal. But then, vice versa, in the community, those artists aren't, their work's not shown as much as the [OSU] artists. Even though maybe they're having the same conversations, there's completely no difference in terms of the scale, the desire, and passion in these two groups.” Despite the inequitable implications of these realities, it does allow the question to be posed: If Columbus's institutions of higher learning are already such strong launchpads for their graduating artists, what could they do to increase access to their resources to other local artistic communities?

What I see is, if you're new to the community as an artist, or maybe a new graduate, there feels to be a period of lost time where you don't know how or where to connect, and I feel like that's might be where we or an institution like Ohio State and other institutions could help to make that connection.

Ohio State is such a behemoth they're really hard to work with on any level. You know, they have you know, great arts programs up there, but they in in all in all honesty, they don't partner very well with the community...it's been tried before with Town and Gown committees, and it's just always about the gown.

Being an artist does not require that an individual is college-educated, and Columbus's function as a launchpad can also ring true for those artists who did not pursue higher education. Even for those artists who do not attend a Columbus-based institute of higher education may find that they need to leave Columbus to access artistic communities, paid work in the arts, or inexpensive home and studio space. Many of the arts leaders are working to keep young people and graduates of local higher education institutions in Columbus, but the launchpad metaphor belies a negative side of this strong preparation for artists entering the workforce. Many artists receive high-quality training in Columbus and then leave to pursue careers in other cities.

How to Support Artists as a Homebase

The second characteristic of Columbus's arts ecosystem is its function as a homebase. Many artists and arts leaders expressed that, in particular, the lack of paid work in the arts in Columbus pushes artists to either leave Columbus (i.e., Columbus is their launchpad) or to remain based in Columbus as their home but periodically leave to show, sell, or perform their artistic work. For these artists, even though they live in Columbus, their artistic identity is not deeply linked to the city.

“I think for the most part, people are going to the big cities, but what is it here that would make me stay, right? What's the work that can get me to stay here?”

“A lot of people, the moment they hit a stride, it's like they don't consider this market. They immediately leave and go somewhere else. So, there's this lack of nurturing.”

The artists' stated needs of building community, paid work, and access to space all make it difficult to establish and maintain an artistic practice or artistic career in Columbus, so many artists choose to leave Columbus to access those things. Even if they choose to live in Columbus part- or full-time, their artistic life might exist wholly outside of the city. What are the implications of Columbus being a homebase for artists? While it is good that artists feel enough of a tie to the city to keep it as their home, there is significant loss in terms of those artists' potential contribution artistically and reputationally to the arts scene, to mentoring young artists, and to keeping the economic impact of their work, like money spent on their tools, studio space, and other business expenses in the city.

Artists we spoke with for the study felt that there is significant artistic talent and potential in Columbus. However, their general sense was that despite many important resources they could access, much is missing. On the whole, even if they love Columbus as a home, they do not feel that the artistic identity of the city helps them in their work (for example, the way being an artist based in another city might carry reputational flair). An arts leader told us, "*Brain drain has become a big topic in Ohio, in the State House.*" This leader went on to tell us that many of the artists, across disciplines, who leave Ohio ultimately want to come back to be near family or live in their home state, and while this arts leader says he makes it his mission to create opportunities for these people to return, he cannot solely make that happen.

What can artists access in other cities that Columbus does not currently have? Below we highlight a selection of the examples brought up by participants about what other cities offer for artists that they cannot currently find in Columbus.

- Charlottesville, VA: Visible Records Artists Residency, BIPOC grants to support studio space, rotating and open curatorial programming
- Cleveland, OH: Financial support of collectors like the Bidwells, Front International
- Minneapolis, MN – Playwrights Center
- Nashville, TN strategic investment in the city as an arts city
- New Orleans, LA, Chicago, IL, and Nashville, TN: active informal communities of people co-creating music
- New York, NY and Los Angeles, CA: Larger community and more opportunity reduces likelihood of tokenism for BIPOC artists
- Milwaukee, WI, Cleveland, OH, and Cincinnati, OH: theatre rehearsals are during the day; "the general thought is that you have quit your other jobs for the weeks that you are in rehearsal. You've moved your life around, and you are going to focus 100% on being an artist. In Columbus every rehearsal is evenings and weekends, because we are waiting for people to finish their primary job."
- Philadelphia, PA: many artist-run spaces
- Pittsburgh, PA: access to residencies like Bunker Projects, Brewhouse Association, Children's Museum

What Columbus Needs to Move Beyond Launchpad and Homebase

If Columbus wants to move past an arts ecosystem that can be best characterized as a launchpad or a homebase, it needs to work toward addressing the lack of community, paid work in the arts, and space for creating and performing art. Working toward these aims will require collaborative thought, investment, and work at different scalar levels, as the underlying issues require changes to social, economic, and spatial infrastructure. Investments in these spaces would certainly benefit from capital investment and developing arts infrastructure and would benefit from careful consideration of how the city's business, economic, and labor force development goals could intersect with and benefit from partnerships with the arts.

Once artist told us, “*Columbus sees itself in a deficit position, so it'll never do anything to strengthen the kind of pillars of our community that could actually strengthen how we're viewed around the world.*” The reality is that despite the perception that Columbus is at a deficit, the city has a significant amount of active artists, arts organizations, festivals, and events that make it a great place for creating, performing, watching, seeing, and buying art. Columbus has an especially robust grants ecosystem for artists, but beyond this, there is significant need for the kinds of formal and informal infrastructure for artists that are discussed in this report.

Without capital investment and infrastructure, Columbus cannot grow into a place that offers enough local opportunity for paid work to move forward. We can promote community, share information and resources, and educate people, but without jobs and creative infrastructure, there will not be significant growth in the number or quality of artists, arts workers, or arts jobs that do not require people to leave Columbus or at least leave to perform, sell, or show their work. As Columbus continues to grow and attract large corporations to build centers and headquarters in central Ohio, it is a good time to consider what kinds of partnerships would improve the local arts ecosystem and possibly attract more investment.

And then networking and community, I would just maybe drill down and specify like, not only among the artists or the those in like creative fields, but also with you know, somebody who's running a tech app and squatting in a co-working space, right? Where you know, there could be really beautiful overlap. But also, that sort of insular, artist against the world kind of mentality sometimes prevents someone from entering any of those conversations openly.

There are there are these like major marquee companies that instead of hiring only creative folks to hang out in the marketing department, you know, what does it look like to tap into that creative problem-solving side of the industry, and then, you know, be very open to employing someone for, say 30 hours a week, including benefits and health care and retirement contributions, right? And giving the sort of that support, financially and stability, so that then someone could have 20 hours a week in their studio without the financial pressure. It feels like there's something interesting there that would solve a lot of problems.

As we stated in the beginning of this report, Columbus artists are a diverse group of individuals who have distinct goals and aims in their artistic work. No one pathway is going to fit the needs of all artists in Columbus. However, the clear threads that were important to artists and arts leaders across disciplines were the need for community, paid work, and space. More generally, artists and arts leaders want to be wanted in Columbus, and to many of them, respect and recognition of the value of their contributions is missing. One arts leader was adamant that respect is needed to move the arts community forward in Columbus, saying “*You need to recognize its value and you need to invest in it. And investment doesn't just come in the way of a check; it also comes in in tangible ways and respect.*” Respecting and investing intentionally in artists, artistic communities, and arts ecosystems in Columbus are needed to support the city’s role as a launchpad and homebase for artists, and hopefully with investment will also come the opportunity to develop a strong ecosystem that allows artists to live, work, and thrive in Columbus.

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About this Project

In the Spring of 2023, we conducted 15 interviews with Columbus-based arts leaders and 5 focus groups made up of 29 Columbus-based artists and creatives. All interviews and focus groups were conducted over Zoom and were scheduled for 60 minutes for interviews and 90 minutes for focus groups. Additionally, we used a Zoom-embedded polling system to collect data from participants about what they most needed to improve their careers. We compensated focus group participants each with a \$40 Amazon gift card. All participants will remain anonymous throughout reporting in accordance with our project IRB agreement.

We reached out to 125 individuals to invite participation, and 44 participated, making for a response rate of 35%. Though we engaged with 44 people for this project, very few were full-time artists. The arts leaders we interviewed all worked full time related to their leadership or administrative role, and some had their own artistic practice on the side. There were relatively few parents in the sample, and the average age of our focus group participants was 39.5, with a range from 19 - 58. Most considered themselves “mid-career artists.”

We could not have completed this work without enthusiastic participation from Columbus’s artists and arts leaders. Many of these individuals told us that they have been asking similar questions and are hopeful that increased understanding and effort can improve the lives and creative work of local artists. We are very grateful for their time, energy, and insight.

About the Authors

Dr. Rachel Skaggs is a sociologist who conducts research about artistic careers. Rachel is the Lawrence and Isabel Barnett Assistant Professor of Arts Management at The Ohio State University, where she teaches classes about arts entrepreneurship, the social world of the arts, and social science research methods. Currently, Rachel is conducting two primary lines of research. One follows a broad array of artists and creative workers, with attention given to precariously situated artists, tracking the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives and livelihoods via qualitative interviews and a large-scale quantitative survey. The second is a book project under contract with Princeton University Press that uses the case of Nashville songwriters to develop a sociological theory of collaborative creativity. Rachel is hopeful for a future in which opportunities to pursue an artistic career in the United States are plentiful, sustainable, and good for artists and their communities.

Amanda Tobin Ripley is a doctoral student in the Arts Administration, Education, and Policy department, specializing in museum education and administration. Her work within museum and gallery spaces seeks to create and support opportunities for individuals to use the imaginative and connective power of the arts to foster a shared sense of belonging, responsibility, and humanity. Amanda holds an M.Ed. in Arts in Education from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a B.A. in Art History and East Asian Studies from Oberlin College. She most recently served as the Associate Director of Education at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA).

Appendix A: Results of Surveys from Focus Groups and Interviews

Figure 1: Focus group participants' most needed resource in financial services

	Total	Visual Artists	Writers	Community Builders	Musicians	Theater
Financial planning/advice (personal)	5	0	3	1	0	1
Financial planning/advice (project-based)	4	1	2	0	1	0
Subsidized housing	4	0	0	1	2	1
Subsidized studio/rehearsal space	7	3	2	0	0	2
Subsidized healthcare	8	1	2	2	1	2
Subsidized childcare	0	0	0	0	0	0
Emergency funds	0	0	0	0	0	0
Pro-bono legal services	1	0	1	0	0	0

Figure 2: Focus group participants' most needed resource in professional development

	Total	Visual Artists	Writers	Community Builders	Musicians	Theater
Social media and marketing training	6	0	4	1	1	0
Formal networking and community-building	7	2	1	0	3	1
Mentorship opportunities	4	1	1	0	0	2
Artist residencies	6	1	1	2	0	2
Teaching opportunities	2	1	1	0	0	0
Skill-building workshops	2	0	0	1	0	1

Figure 3: Arts leader interviewee selections for resources most needed by the kinds of artists with whom they work

	Total
Financial planning services or advice	3
Networking and community	3
Subsidized healthcare	3
Subsidized housing	2
Pro bono legal services	1
Social media & marketing training	1
Subsidized studio/rehearsal space	1
N/A	1
Risk management guidance	0

Appendix B: Discipline-Specific Resource Needs Stated in Focus Groups

- Visual Arts
 - Informal community-building opportunities
 - Affordable studio space, for making and documenting artwork
 - Reduced siloing, particularly around OSU and CCAD communities
 - Patronage and funding directly to support artists, not organizations
 - Financial support surrounding the labor of making and showing art, not just the finished product
 - Central events calendar
 - More art criticism and writing about art in Columbus
 - Financial support beyond emergency funds
- Music
 - Access to rehearsal space
 - Access to recording studios
 - Formal networking opportunities to support mentorship, communication, and knowledge-sharing
 - Reduced siloing
 - Building audiences for diverse genres
- Theatre
 - Subsidized rehearsal and event space
 - Artist residency opportunities, especially to experiment with ideas that might not be marketable
 - Skill-building workshops and mentorship
 - A fund to supplement low-paying jobs
- Film
 - Subsidized legal advice
- Writing
 - Clear communication and outreach about events and grant opportunities
 - Formal mentorship programs
 - Reduced siloing
 - Universal Basic Income
- Community Builders
 - Reduction in siloing
 - Clear standards for compensating artists
 - Live-work artist residencies
 - A common, easy to use calendar for arts events in Columbus

Appendix C: Resources Shared by Research Participants

A full documentation of all Columbus institutions mentioned in the study is available via this Google Maps list: <https://goo.gl/maps/3pvuwgqBrMJY6Pcv9>.

Throughout interviews and focus groups, arts leaders and artists shared a number of resources that have been useful to their artistic practice and work. We listed the local organizations in the report but did not have space to include resources from outside of Columbus. Many of these resources are open and accessible to local artists though they are based elsewhere.

- Ohio Arts Council: <https://oac.ohio.gov/>
- Visible Records (Charlottesville, VA): <https://www.visible-records.com/>
- Playwrights Center (Minneapolis, MN): <https://pwcenter.org/>
- Bunker Projects (Pittsburgh, PA): <https://www.bunkerprojects.org/>
- Brew House Association (Pittsburgh, PA): <https://brewhousearts.org/>
- Springboard for the Arts (St. Paul, MN): <https://springboardforthearts.org/>
- National Independent Venue Association: <https://www.nivassoc.org/>
- Nothing for the Group newsletter: <https://nothingforthegroup.substack.com/>
- New York Foundation for the Arts: <https://www.nyfa.org/>
- Fine Arts Work Center (Provincetown, MA): <https://fawc.org/>
- Creative Mornings: <https://creativemornings.com/>
- Collective Art Networks Journal (Cleveland, OH): <http://canjournal.org/>
- Bridgeway Capital (Pittsburgh, PA): <https://www.bridgewaycapital.org/>
- Tamarack Foundation (WV): <https://tamarackfoundation.org/>

Appendix D: Questions for Consideration

A question came up explicitly in a number of conversations throughout this research: Does Columbus really want artists? Does Columbus even want a thriving artistic community? Ample research shows the economic and social value of artists to their communities¹⁴. Therefore, whatever the impetus for feeling that Columbus does not want artists, if Columbus wants to continue growth and investment in strategic ways, it should want a thriving artistic community.

Columbus is no stranger to excellence in the arts and does a wonderful job supporting high-quality arts programming, and education. However, investment and cultivating a good ecosystem is an ongoing project. If Columbus does indeed want artists and wants artists to thrive, it should consider how to continually improve and invest in the local arts ecosystem. Toward this end, we post the following questions for leaders, artists, and others to consider. In these questions, when we say “Columbus”, we mean all of the people, institutions, and organizations who comprise and care for this city.

How much can Columbus do to break through the “insular pockets” or silos of artists, both within and between arts disciplines?

Who are the patrons of art in Columbus? Who are the audiences?

What equity barriers exist currently that keep people from even beginning, let alone staying, in the arts?

What can Columbus do to support its established, mid-career, and otherwise prominent artists?

What would it mean for Columbus-based artists if they could access the resources they say they need at a free or reduced price point?

What would Columbus’s arts ecosystem be like if there were increased opportunities for paid work creating or performing art?

Where might artists in Columbus gather to build community regularly, both formally and informally?

What opportunities exist for new skill-building and mentorship experiences for local artists?

Why is there little to no writing about the arts in Columbus? Which media outlets would be good homes for arts writing and art criticism?

Where might Columbus artists, residents, and visitors go to find a clear and easy-to-use comprehensive calendar of local arts events and opportunities?

When artists leave Columbus to pursue their artistic work, what does the city lose?

¹⁴ (Crisman 2022; Florida 2004; Goldberg-Miller 2018)