

Doing Things Differently

Stories from innovation initiatives in the arts.



New Pathways for the Arts
Young Audiences Arts for Learning Connecticut

Young Audiences Arts for Learning Connecticut (YAC) is a key provider in Connecticut's arts education landscape. Founded in 1979 to help children develop as creative and productive individuals and to make the arts an integral part of their lives, YAC is now the 10th largest among the 33 national chapters of Young Audiences, Inc. In 2007, YAC became the State's affiliate for VSA, an international organization on arts and disability, expanding its mission to include access to facilities and high-quality arts learning for children with disabilities, preparing artists and teachers to work with students with disabilities, and giving these students the skills they need to pursue careers in the arts. YAC has an annual budget of nearly \$1 million, serves 86 percent of Connecticut towns and cities, and engages over 100 professional teaching artists. In one year, YAC typically offers 1,100 workshops, 1,300 performances, and 50 artist residencies.



YAC affiliate artist Sarah Haskell leads a weaving project with youth at Nayaug School. Photo by Aleta Staton

Starting Conditions: An organization with a well-kept secret

With such a record of success, what drove YAC's participation in the *New Pathways Program*? Fundamentally, leaders were frustrated by the organization's lack of visibility among parents, educators and potential patrons. "What we do happens quietly during the school day with artists and students," they said, "and to most of Connecticut's residents, YAC is virtually unknown or easily forgotten when clients no longer have a need for our services." One person noted, "If you don't know about YAC, you *won't* know about them." Board and staff members believed this lack of visibility was primarily a marketing problem, citing marketing materials that neither accurately portrayed the image and mission of YAC nor made a relevant case for policy and decision-makers, especially prospective funders.

The lack of visibility was complicated by conflicting perceptions of the organization. Was YAC an arts education program dedicated to affecting children's lives in life-changing ways? Or was it a booking agency for artists?

In background interviews conducted by EmcArts facilitator Melissa Dibble, Dibble learned that there were conflicting views. For example, a representative of Connecticut's state arts organization (and a past YAC Board member who has supported the organization for 20 years) said that she was "not aware that YAC was providing professional development for artists," saying instead that she thought it was a "booking agency." Another person said, "Some think YAC is the artist, not the one supplying the artist. Most people don't understand the layers." YAC leaders clearly felt the impact of these comments. They acknowledged they were in the middle of an identity crisis of their own making. "It's our fault," they said. "We've perpetuated this misunderstanding and it's biting us in the back."

All this was diminishing YAC's impact in its service area. To make matters worse, structural deficits prevented the organization from responding aggressively to its challenges. The staff was small, contributed income was inad-

equated, and both Board and staff were reluctant to take risks. YAC recognized it needed new, more robust thinking, and it needed to take steps to overcome "a pervasive outdated culture" that was stifling creative thinking about resource allocation and funding strategies. "We are being more reactive than proactive in programming activities that might enlarge our scope in urban areas," said organizational leaders, "and these challenges hinder our ability to realize our mission across the entire state." *New Pathways*, YAC leaders believed, would help them find break-through solutions to the challenges facing them and lead to a "new paradigm for moving forward with innovative projects."

YAC entered the *New Pathways Program* in 2010 as one of 14 New Haven-area arts organizations that participated in a series of hands-on convenings; it was selected as one of four organizations to take part in the Core Program, an intensive course of facilitated meetings to develop new adaptive responses to major challenges.



Top: Artist Adam Battelstein and a student engage in a movement-based learning activity. Right: Artist Susan Rosano and a youth participant work together on Oil Drum Art.



Milestones and Learning: Small Steps Leverage Big Changes

Key Challenges

When YAC entered *New Pathways*, it was hamstrung by entrenched beliefs and practices. As Dibble says, "Little things always got the organization stuck, internalized and anxious. Board members just weren't very generative in their thinking, and they weren't making connections between the use of resources and the organization's future." Eileen Carpinella, Executive Director of YAC, agrees, saying that the Board was so afraid of risk (thanks to unilateral executive decision-making and crippling overspending in the past) that it had stopped investing in the organization's growth, infrastructure and advancement. A financial analysis prepared by EmcArts showed

that YAC had accumulated an unrestricted cash reserve of over \$500,000, yet the organization relied almost solely on earned income from its programs, limiting its vision to annual horizons while paying little attention to long-term strategic issues. With 90 percent of its revenue coming from fee-for-service programs and dedicated to covering program expenses, there was little left to invest in the organization itself without dipping into reserves. Yet the organization was reluctant to do so. Exceptionally solvent for an organization with a budget of under \$1 million, YAC was spending only 1.5 percent of its income on marketing and fundraising aimed at maximizing program development, reach and impact. It was not surprising, therefore, to see signs of declining revenue, especially during a challenging economic period.

There were other challenges as well: How could YAC and VSA—both affiliates of national organizations—work in a way that was more complementary, especially given that VSA provided significant funding to YAC to increase its activity through local access and disability programs? How could YAC reap the benefits of its national affiliation while exploiting its own autonomy and uniqueness in the region? How could the organization involve artists more deeply, build the adaptive capacity of a Board that historically had resisted change, and overcome the widespread perception that it was more about selling artists than providing educational programming?

Shifts in Assumptions

Tackling these questions led YAC to probe a number of closely held assumptions. Coming into *New Pathways*, leaders thought their communication problem was primarily an external one; they learned it was not. While one person interviewed by Dibble said, “YAC is not here to give artists gigs,” another said, “The core purpose of YAC is to serve as a hub for local artists who are looking to find work in the community.” Staff acknowledged, “We do have some habits...of verbalizing in ways that perpetuate the booking agency misunderstanding. Also, the writing in our brochure contributes to this misperception.” Assuming that artists correctly understood YAC’s message was a mistake, and YAC’s Team realized it could not improve its external communications without first aligning its messaging among internal stakeholders. As Carpinella says, “Artists did not necessarily understand the mission of YAC, what the role of a non-profit was, or what we were doing collaboratively and on behalf of our artists. We learned that we needed to use our artists more strategically to communicate our mission and purpose, and that meant doing more ‘informances’ with them.”

Another fundamental assumption overturned during the *New Pathways* experience was that maintaining a substantial cash reserve was the key to YAC’s success, providing a critical hedge against future economic downturns and keeping the organization healthy; they learned it was not. Stakeholders regularly described YAC as “thrifty” and “fiscally responsible,” and they gave the organization high marks for “putting aside funds” and “making every dollar count.” Yet as Dibble observes, “The YAC Board ultimately realized that without strategic investments of available capital, it was ‘starving the organization’ and hinder-

ing it from improving and expanding its programmatic impact, managing its income streams effectively, and developing more targeted and strategic messaging to stakeholders.”

Finally, although YAC acknowledged the lack of Board commitment, understanding and leadership as a significant problem, most believed that the Board simply needed more information in order to feel needed and productive. Staff learned, however, that the Board wanted more. Information itself was not enough; Board members needed to be intimately involved in planning, evaluation, and generative thinking about the future. Board composition and performance, too, needed to change. As one stakeholder said, “Finding the right folks to serve, educating them on their role, and getting them to function together...is a challenge.”

New Pathways to Mission

Aided by Dibble, the YAC Team began identifying strategic responses to these problems. As artists, Board members and staff on the Team came together in collaborative ways to address the organization’s challenges, ideas began to flow freely. Often these were small steps or tiny actions that leveraged big payoffs. “It was fascinating to watch,” says Dibble, “as YAC got moving very quickly with small experiments that became pivotal for the organization.” Carpinella adds, “To someone outside the organization, what we did might seem small—like looking at how dollars could be reinvested—but to us this was a very big endeavor.” Almost immediately, YAC committed funds to hire fundraising, bookkeeping and education consultants. To address marketing concerns, YAC improved its web presence and social networking capabilities, using a small grant from the Arts Council of New Haven to create an online searchable brochure and artist videos that could be used to promote programs and services through Facebook and other sites.

Small experiments became pivotal for YAC. “To someone outside the organization, what we did might seem small—like looking at how dollars could be reinvested—but to us this was a big endeavor,” YAC Executive Director Eileen Carpinella says.

Staffing up was just the beginning, and YAC turned quickly to deploying its existing human resources in ways that were new to the organization’s practice. Rather than adding additional artists to its roster, YAC enrolled small working groups of interested artists to design and produce new programming. YAC launched an artist blog, established an artist liaison to the Board, started an “Artist Jam” event for sharing information and promoting artist-to-artist collaborations, and expanded the role of artists in designing marketing strategies and showcases. Above all, these changes aimed to create an artist community that would inspire artists to step up more vigorously on behalf of YAC and its mission. Individually, artists benefited from enhanced networking with their peers.

YAC also made changes to its Board practices, involving the Board in critical discussions about the organization’s future, conducting seminars on governance and fundraising, and initiating a strategic planning process. According to Carpinella, this has been a significant shift: Board meeting agendas that once focused exclusively on finances now identify expected outcomes for meetings, giving directors the assurance that they are engaged in meaningful discussions and are generating results for the organization in multiple arenas.

Most important, perhaps, is YAC’s dedication to continuing the cross-constituent team process it learned through *New Pathways*. “The concept of the Innovation Team was new to us,” says Carpinella, “and it will be a lasting part of our organization. It’s a good model—bringing people together in a cohesive group to innovate and strategize around important decision making.”

Obstacles and Enablers

The prevailing culture at YAC was the primary obstacle to change within the organization. Carpinella admits that the concepts of innovation were difficult for many in the organization. “The organization as a whole tends not to take risks because Board members recall when we were in dire straits,” said one interviewee. Consistently, sources said that the Board lacked “a proactive culture that generates new thinking and follows through.” The Board’s aversion to spending accumulated capital often clashed with YAC’s need to take calculated risks, and any risk at all was perceived as threatening the organization. Staff, too were sometimes reluctant to challenge or push the Board in new directions.

One unanticipated obstacle—the lack of strong relationships among Board members and artists—played out in surprising ways. After an extensive search, Carpinella hired a YAC teaching artist as Education Consultant. Some Board members, however, questioned the decision (even though it had Board support), and in a closed session, decided it was inappropriate for a teaching artist to serve in this position. This decision led to controversy on the Board (which ultimately reversed its position), and several Board members resigned.

What prevented YAC from self-destructing in the midst of controversy? Leaders credit *New Pathways* with helping them create an environment that engages more people in the core work of the organization. “It opened Board members, staff, artists and volunteers to the fact that we all must work together for the good of the organization,” said one Team member. For the Team’s third meeting with Dibble, for example, Carpinella invited the entire Board, as well as a larger number of teaching artists. According to Dibble, this “enabled others in important ways. The people who showed up were those who wanted to do the work, and it really got the blood flowing with groups from different parts of the organization.”

Carpinella says, “The transition has been positive for us. The Board is smaller, but those who are left are those who are most committed to the organization.”

It was also critical, leaders say, to acknowledge the impact of taking small steps. Rather than looking for one big idea to jump start innovation, YAC

relied on small, impactful activities that created aggregate momentum. “It was exciting,” says Dibble, “as the Team in one final session generated a list of 22 small activities they had completed, each of which had their own impact and then combined to make a big difference in addressing YAC’s key challenges.”

The Impact: From Inaction to Multiple Strategies

Carpinella says *New Pathways* came at a critical time. “The Board controversy,” she says, “had to do with pushing forward with change. Everything has settled down now, and we are a stronger organization.” *New Pathways* also was instrumental in showing artists how they could have a real impact in the organization. “As a result of the meetings,” says Carpinella, “artists grabbed onto the idea of connecting programs to the State’s educational standards. It was a real ‘a-ha’ moment for them. They are also latching onto the idea of training, really feeling that YAC is making an investment in them.”

With increased artist commitment and additional staff, as well as a renewed institutional focus and shared energy throughout the organization, YAC is using its experience to propel future actions. YAC’s work already has leveraged support from the local community, including a grant from the Community Foundation of Greater New Haven that will allow the organization to continue working with EmcArts on planning and additional capacity-building efforts. The Team and the full Board will create a new mission and vision platform for YAC and will soon begin an inclusive strategic planning process. YAC also has joined a leadership group in Hartford aimed at matching organizations with potential new Board members, and the organization is on a fast track to building a new governance structure.

YAC is focusing more on its artists, too, looking for multiple pathways to unlock artistic capital, including empowering, training and incentivizing artists to do marketing and sales. Using a local peer advisor network, YAC expects to provide intensive training within the organization around communications and identity, with the goal of drafting a consistent and inclusive message about the breadth of YAC’s programming through a new “Arts for All” concept that incorporates traditional programming with VSA activities. Finally, YAC is taking important steps to enhance its visibility as an educational services provider by surveying constituents to determine program priorities, and starting an Education Council of arts organizations in New Haven to discuss how innovation could be promoted within the system.

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YAC’s *New Pathways* Team

Adam Battelstein Artist	Eileen Carpinella Executive Director	Bob Karanian Board Member	Aleta Staton Program & Education Specialist
Loraine Brown Program Manager	Kathryn Giampietro Board Member	Krista May Development Specialist	Melissa Dibble Facilitator EmcArts
Rose Cohen Program Committee Member	Joe Juliano Board Member	Judith Mortensen VSA Arts Program Manager	
	Mike Kachuba Artist		