



AZ Creative Voices: Learning and working together for positive community change

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AZ CCI is a learning program wherein diverse teams from Arizona cities, towns, and neighborhoods reimagine community assets and devise meaningful projects that place creative engagement, ethical and equitable practices, and local wisdom at the center.

Learning and working together for positive community change

Co-creating opportunities



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How and why did institutions come together in support of the Arizona Creative Communities initiative?

We started with some big questions.

As institutional partners and stewards of arts-based resources, we wondered together. We have different missions that often intersect. We work in environments where financial resources can be scarce, but where creativity and potential are limitless.

We are accountable to different but overlapping constituencies—a complex Venn diagram of artists and arts practitioners, students, educators, grantees, tradition bearers, makers, community partners, and ultimately residents of Arizona and the varied places where we live and work.

Our constituents are generous. We are lucky. Many share with us their challenges, their critical feedback, their time and talent.

So we came together, holding precious knowledge provided by our constituents, and carrying with us our histories, relationships, some resources, and a strong desire to learn. We asked ourselves:

- How do Arizona communities understand their creative assets and imagine their potential?
- Can we co-create opportunities, alongside community leaders and arts practitioners and experts of all kinds, exploring the myriad ways creativity can be put to work for positive community impact?
- Can we enter into more reciprocal (and less hierarchical) relationships with diverse stakeholders across our state?
- Can we invest more in these relationships, and over a longer span of time, than is typically sanctioned by institutional systems?
- How can we effectively collaborate as institutions? Are we aligned in our values?

- Can we leverage our collective resources in new ways, and envision those resources more broadly?
- Can we use our positionality to seed and nurture a learning cohort that might grow into an enduring network of Arizonans who support each other's goals and aspirations?
- How can we learn from community stakeholders in ways that are supportive and not extractive, and then internalize and implement more equitable approaches?
- As institutions, can we admit failure and commit to course correction even if the outcomes and actions have implications for our own organizations?
- As we engage in community-engaged, place-based creative work, can we ensure our approaches honor the collective knowledge, histories, and aspirations of individuals and the places they call home?
- Communities experience challenges, and local wisdom is the most essential ingredient in developing relevant responses. Can the arts help?

This list is not comprehensive of course. And many of our questions changed over time.

An active learning network

In the spring of 2017, the [Arizona Commission on the Arts](#) and [Arizona State University's Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts](#), with guidance from [Southwest Folklife Alliance](#) and support from the [Surdna Foundation](#) and the [Arizona Community Foundation](#), issued a call for small teams representing Arizona cities, towns, and neighborhoods to participate in the [Arizona Creative Communities Institute \(AZ CCI\)](#).

Twenty-two teams applied to participate, and nine were selected for an inaugural cohort.

The teams, each composed of diverse members of the represented community, participated in intensive training and multidirectional mentorship, and received funding support for community-engaged arts-based projects that were devised and implemented in locations across the state.

AZ CCI teams became part of an active learning network, with opportunities to learn from and with local and national experts, as well as peers from other Arizona cities, towns, and neighborhoods. Sometimes there were fifty people in a room, exploring together, while other engagements took the shape of one-on-one site visits between an institutional partner and team member, brainstorming around an obstacle.

Most of the learning took place in the liminal and in-between spaces, as together we strengthened our practices around the solicitation and provision of candid feedback, the intentional evolution of processes, follow-up and follow-through.

For more than two years we learned together—artists and community leaders, educators, dedicated residents, business owners, and service providers—all sharing expertise in this evolving creative collaboration.

Sharing resources in new ways

As institutional partners, we learned so much. Assumptions were tested and proven, others overturned. In the process, we made many mistakes.

We learned that customized approaches are paramount, and that internal systems of all kinds must adapt to accommodate the more reciprocal relationships we aimed to establish and sustain.

We learned to be more present in a thousand ways, including providing leadership in navigating institutional bureaucracies so they wouldn't stifle emergent community work. Institutional systems can be rigid, and we didn't always hit the mark. (We know this because AZ CCI team members told us. We count it as a success that they communicated this feedback.)

We learned to deepen our practices around centering local knowledge and asking permission to enter into a community challenge. This was particularly difficult: to know when to intervene, even when our intervention was requested. Teams, and communities, are not monolithic.

We learned to consider time and timelines in place-based ways. People know how things move in their cities, towns, and neighborhoods. We should listen.

This list isn't comprehensive either. We're still unpacking.

We do know for certain that what we learned in this experience is showing up across our institutions, relationships, and approaches.

We are partnering and sharing resources in new ways. Engaging in rigorous reflective processes when considering institutional and community collaborations, focusing on sharing power and resources, and adapting our strategies to the situation or moment.

We now ask: can we best engage as supporters, advocates, investors, partners? When should we connect as co-creators, and when should we get out of the way of artists and communities who are already engaged in vital work?

We also know that tremendous arts and cultural work is possible, and is already happening, in communities across our state, and that community stories—including the stories of AZ CCI teams and their projects—are best delivered in their own words and voices.

We hope people will read about AZ CCI teams' experiences in the essays that follow, through forthcoming ethnographic documentation, and hear from teams directly via the [AZ Creative Voices podcast series](#).

In the end we feel enormous gratitude for the multitude of individuals who contributed their time and talent to this wondrous, often messy, ever-changing experiment. We look forward to all of the ways we can continue to learn together in support of vibrant, meaningful, equitable arts- and place-based work in cities, towns, and neighborhoods across Arizona.

Cover image: With support from AZ CCI, the Barrio Stories Project celebrated Barrio Anita through a two-day heritage festival featuring large-scale video projections on historic buildings and screens of oral histories and archival images, a pop-up history museum, a 1950s style backyard fiesta and more. Photo by Kate Gross.