

Advancing Inclusivity, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility: Today's Challenges in the Arts and Culture Sector

Dat Ngo, Vice President

The arts and culture sector is facing an array of legal and cultural challenges that threaten the advancement of Inclusivity, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility, and Success (IDEAS). Recent rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court,¹ including the decision to restrict affirmative action in higher education, have raised concerns that similar limitations could affect hiring practices and programming in cultural institutions. In states like Florida, the “Stop WOKE Act” (House Bill 7)², which limits discussions on race, gender, and identity in public education, has extended its reach into nonprofit, university, and cultural sectors, forcing organizations to reconsider their approaches to equity and inclusion initiatives.

These legal challenges underscore the urgent need for arts organizations to establish long-term strategies that are resilient to external pressures. According to Americans for the Arts³, 22% of nonprofit board members are people of color, revealing a gap in volunteer leadership and community representation. Organizations should pursue a path to focus on embedding equity at all levels, including board and staff leadership, and look to sustainable models that protect against legal limitations. This edition of *Arts Insights* provides targeted strategies for organizations to navigate these complexities, offering tools like equity-based assessments and climate surveys that help organizations identify areas of vulnerability balanced with opportunities for growth in a shifting legal, social, and cultural landscape.

Embedding IDEAS into Organizational Strategy

To make meaningful progress, arts organizations must fully integrate IDEAS into their strategic frameworks. Moving beyond performative gestures by embedding equity into day-to-day operations is essential. A 2021 study by the National Guild for Community Arts Education⁴ found that organizations with structured, measurable equity goals were more successful in achieving staff and audience diversity. This means that organizations should prioritize data-driven goal setting with clear metrics for progress.

Nonprofits like the Martha Graham Dance⁵ Company have successfully integrated IDEAS into their long-term strategy by creating specific benchmarks for diversity, such as ensuring representation at every level of the organization, from dancers to board members. They also developed an internal system of accountability through equity audits and regular staff training. Various companies offer strategic planning, community engagement, and IDEAS consulting services to help organizations align equity goals with their broader mission through targeted assessments and action plans. By incorporating a comprehensive IDEAS framework, organizations can track progress, ensure accountability, and build resilient structures that are equipped to adapt to ongoing changes in the legal, social, and cultural environments.

Understanding the Current Landscape

To move forward effectively, organizations must assess their current standing by conducting internal audits and assessments that reveal underlying systemic inequities shaping workplace culture, hiring practices, and

¹ U.S. Supreme Court. (2023). Ruling on Affirmative Action in Higher Education. Available from the U.S. Supreme Court

² State of Florida. (2022). Stop WOKE Act (House Bill 7). Retrieved from <https://www.flsenate.gov/>

³ Americans for the Arts. (2022). Nonprofit Board Diversity Report. Retrieved from <https://www.americansforthearts.org/>

⁴ National Guild for Community Arts Education. “GuildNotes Issue 1, 2021.” March 17, 2021.

⁵ Martha Graham Dance Company. (2021). Diversity and Inclusion in the Arts. Retrieved from <https://marthagraham.org/>

representation at all levels. A 2023 report by the Association of African American Museums⁶ found that barriers to leadership persist for minority professionals, especially in museums.

A comprehensive internal assessment is key for nonprofit organizations to understand their current landscape. For instance, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art⁷ undertook an internal audit after staff and community members raised concerns about inequitable treatment. The museum's leadership responded by launching a formal equity initiative, conducting a climate survey, and restructuring hiring practices to address representation gaps. Detailed IDEAS audits, cultural competency assessments, communication culture surveys, and data analysis can help organizations develop a clearer understanding of their strengths and areas for improvement. These tools create opportunities to identify actionable strategies that can lead to sustainable, systemic change.

Leadership and Accountability as Drivers of Change

Engaged leadership and accountability are crucial for driving lasting change in the arts and culture sector. While discussions around diversity have increased, a 2021 OPERA America report⁸ revealed that U.S. opera companies continue to have predominantly white leadership. Similarly, American Alliance of Museum's 2020 *TrendsWatch* report⁹ found that museums with structured accountability frameworks—such as regular equity reviews and transparent hiring processes—have made more substantial progress in diversifying leadership.

One successful example of leadership accountability is The Public Theater¹⁰ in New York, which set clear diversity targets, created a diversity task force, and committed to annual public reporting on progress. This transparent approach has helped shift the organization's culture and attract a more diverse range of artists, board members, and administrators. By incorporating leadership training and mentorship, organizational policies can hold leadership accountable, helping them create equitable and transparent environments.

Amplifying Marginalized Voices Through Programming

Programming is one of the most effective tools for advancing equity within arts organizations. A 2023 study by the International Association of Blacks in Dance¹¹ reported that inclusive programming significantly increased audience diversity, particularly among younger demographics. This includes programming that reflects diverse cultural traditions, thus attracting a wider audience base. The League of American Orchestras¹² found similar results when orchestras integrated Black, Indigenous, and People of Color composers and cultural programming, which helped them foster deeper connections with underserved communities.

The Detroit Symphony Orchestra¹³ is another notable example, having introduced a Composer-in-Residence program for Black composers, significantly diversifying their repertoire and audience base. They partnered with local schools and community organizations to build cultural programming that resonates with diverse audiences. Organizations who lack the capacity to expand programming in ways that amplify marginalized voices would be wise to see out guidance on partnerships, community engagement, and inclusive content development. This holistic approach ensures that an analysis of historical programming serves as a catalyst for authentic representation and audience diversification.

Moving Forward with Intention and Commitment

The path forward for arts organizations requires sustained effort and genuine commitment to IDEAS principles. Whether through regular self-assessments, leadership accountability, or inclusive programming, organizations can position themselves to thrive in an ever-evolving landscape. Embedding these values into every facet of an

⁶ Association of African American Museums (AAAM). (2023). *Barriers to Leadership in African American Museums: A Report*. Available from AAAM.

⁷ San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA). (2022). *Equity Initiatives and Climate Survey Results*. Available from <https://www.sfmoma.org/>

⁸ OPERA America. (2021). *Diversity in Leadership within U.S. Opera Companies*. Available from OPERA America.

⁹ American Alliance of Museums (AAM). (2020). *TrendsWatch 2020: Accountability in Museum Leadership*. Available from AAM.

¹⁰ The Public Theater. (2022). *Annual Diversity Progress Report*. Available from <https://www.publictheater.org/>

¹¹ International Association of Blacks in Dance (IABD). (2023). *Inclusive Programming and Audience Diversification in Dance*.

¹² League of American Orchestras. (2022). *Orchestral Equity and Engagement Study*. Available from the League of American Orchestras.

¹³ Detroit Symphony Orchestra. (2021). *Composer-in-Residence Program*. Available from <https://www.dso.org/>

organization's operations ensures they are not just momentary initiatives but central to the institution's mission and work.



Dat Ngo, Vice President

Dat Ngo (he/him/his) has held arts education and community engagement leadership positions for over 20 years. An accomplished nonprofit educator, arts administrator, coach, and social justice advocate, Ngo has dedicated his career to leading and supporting equity, diversity, inclusion, and belonging efforts within a wide variety of organizations, including professional theatres, schools, and community centers. His work in the arts and culture sector has focused on program planning, strategic visioning, diversity training, executive coaching, and community engagement. In his roles at Shakespeare Theatre Company, Sitar Arts Center, and, most recently, Adventure Theatre, Ngo developed and implemented strategic initiatives that ensured educational excellence and expanded access to impartial learning and workforce opportunities for historically vulnerable communities. A first-generation Vietnamese-American, Ngo devised original performances with teens at Asian Arts Initiative. He has served as a panelist for the DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and was a member of the 2018 National Facilitator Cohort for artEquity. Ngo continues to partner with organizations such as artEquity, American Alliance for Theatre and Education, and the National Endowment for the Arts in the fight for racial justice and ensuring equity and access for all who wish to engage with the arts. Ngo holds a bachelor of science degree in film and television from Boston University. certifications in competencies, communications, and motivations analysis from Target Training International.

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