

# Community Outreach and Assessment of Interest in North Hennepin Community College Fine Arts Building Project



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Resilient Communities Project

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## Executive Summary

**Purpose:** This report, as well as an accompanying PowerPoint presentation, serve to summarize the findings gathered the SW8551 team of students who report to The City of Brooklyn Park, North Hennepin Community College (NHCC) and the Resilient Communities Project (RCP) who are collaborating on building a new fine arts center on the NHCC campus. This report includes background information about Brooklyn Park, community input regarding needs and assets of the Brooklyn Park Community relevant to arts programming and physical space, and a literature review of best practices concerning community-based planning. As a result of this research, several recommendations are proposed for how to advance the project of planning an equitable and accessible Performing and Fine Arts Education Center at NHCC.

**Methodology:** Interviews were conducted and consisted of open ended questions to allow for all forms of response. The group contacted student groups, individual students, community members, and religious congregations, theater professionals from other communities, a library staff, and area-school administrators and social workers. Despite repeated attempts, only seven responses were collected.

**Findings:** The team received few responses from the local Brooklyn Park Community. Community members as well as the literature and best practices interviewees pointed to physical space needs for versatility, accessibility, and current technology. They also pointed to strategies for community engagement including engaging other students on campus and the surrounding community through content and programming that could engage in building a stronger creative community.

**Recommendations:** The team found from best practices research that continuing to engage the community will help build alliances and support. A few ways to do this are:

- Employ local artists as adjunct professors or guest artists.
- Create and maintain ongoing relationships with community groups and individuals: artists, churches, local businesses and groups.
- Seek out input from people with limited mobility to ensure equitable access.
- Define what is included in “Fine Arts Programming”
- Consider children's programming as a way to connect to the community.
- Support and produce programming that centers around diversity and community concerns in Brooklyn Park.

Physical space and technology needs were also addressed, and it was found that a black box theater space, flexible gallery area, prep kitchen and current technology were important.



## Introduction

Communities across the globe are constantly having to assess and evaluate the role the arts play. Communities may begin by thinking about the buildings and spaces that arts must occupy, but soon it becomes clear that there is more that must be assessed, evaluated and promoted. As Chang and Lee (2003) shared that the conventional physical space orientation is not enough, “Challenging conventional notions of arts spaces as only being physical spaces occupied by the arts, we propose to investigate the social environments and the creative landscapes occupied by the arts as well” (p. 128). The City of Brooklyn Park, North Hennepin Community College (NHCC) and the Resilient Communities Project (RCP) chose to collaborate on building a new fine arts center on the NHCC campus. They wisely set a goal to develop a culturally equitable and welcoming arts and education center through programming and physical space (Resilient Communities Project, 2016). The following report is a synthesis of information gathered about best practices and community response regarding the building and the use of a new arts space as a part of the 2016-2017 Resilient Communities Project—Brooklyn Park.

### Background on NHCC and Brooklyn Park

NHCC serves as a hub for the Brooklyn Park community, with 10,655 students coming primarily from high schools and communities within a 5-mile radius of NHCC (North, 2015). NHCC offers multiple Associate in Fine Arts (AFA) degree options: A Theatre AFA, a Studio Arts AFA, a Music AFA, and a Creative Writing AFA (Academic, n.d.). The Theatre department of NHCC has grown rapidly within the last 5 years, from 61 students with a declared AFA major in 2011 to 177 students with a declared AFA major in 2015 (Facts, n.d.).

The City of Brooklyn Park had grown rapidly as well, from a population of 67,388 individuals in 2000 to a population of 75,781 individuals. The ethnic demographics of Brooklyn Park have shifted drastically over the last 10 years as well. In 2001, 73.21% individuals in Brooklyn Park identified as White, while in 2010 this number dropped to 52.25%. Twenty percent of the Brooklyn Park population was born outside of the United States, and 25% of the population speaks a language besides English in their homes. Brooklyn Park's population is estimated to reach nearly 85,000 individuals by 2020, and it is likely that minority ethnicities will be the majority of the population by then (Brooklyn, 2015). Additionally, the proposed Blue Line light rail extension is scheduled to reach the Brooklyn Park community (METRO, n.d.). The City and NHCC hope to create a space where community members and NHCC students can gather and participate in arts programming. Given the diversity of the Brooklyn Park Community, the project stakeholders wish to ensure the planned facility and programming will be culturally sensitive and welcoming to all community members.

## **Project Description**

In collaboration with SW 8551 students on this project, NHCC, the RCP, and Brooklyn Park wished to:

- Understand the performing and fine arts needs and assets within the NHCC and Brooklyn Park communities, and
- Identify strategies, resources, best practices, and recommendations for developing a Performing and Fine Arts Education Center that models equity in action and serves the needs of the NHCC and Brooklyn Park communities.



The City and NHCC sought recommendations for arts programming, such as performances and educational programs, and recommendations for how the physical space could be culturally appropriate. In order to delve into the question, “How can the proposed Performing and Fine Arts Education Center model equity in action, both in physical space and programmatically?” In order to answer this question, the team engaged with various stakeholders in the community and attempted to fulfill the request to gather community input and best practices. The team communicated with student groups from NHCC, Brooklyn Park community members, congregations in Brooklyn Park, theatre professionals from communities comparable to Brooklyn Park and other sources to compile comments and preferences concerning the proposed Performing and Fine Arts Education Center.

Within the scope of this project, the team of students was charged with (1) conducting outreach with Brooklyn Park community members and other stakeholders to assess community needs and assets related to the proposed Performing and Fine Arts Center, (2) researching and reviewing literature on best practices to create and sustain a performing arts center geared toward community needs, and (3) presenting recommendations regarding programming and physical space with asset-based and culturally competent approaches in mind.

## Methods

The team contacted and conducted interviews with various stakeholders in order to assess the needs and assets of the Brooklyn Park Community and explore the question of how to create an accessible and equitable fine arts center at NHCC. The interviews were conducted using general open ended questions about the community and utility of a performing arts space (see Appendix C for the script). Open ended questions provided the fewest barriers to input, providing opportunity to gather new ideas from interviewees.

In an effort to gain diverse perspectives, twenty-five student groups from NHCC were contacted, along with three Brooklyn Park community members, six religious congregations, four theatre professionals, one library professional, three school administrators and three school social workers. Despite extensive and repeated attempts at outreach, only seven interviews were completed due to response rate. The interviews were conducted with two Brooklyn Park Community Members, one employee of a religious congregation, and four theatre professionals.

Outreach and recruitment was completed using convenience sampling. The team gathered contacts via internet searches for contact information for the following stakeholders: religious congregations, the library professional, school administrators and school social workers. Personal and professional connections were used to engage the theatre professionals and Brooklyn Park community members.

## Findings

When designing a new space for the arts, planners must take time to think about providing for a thriving arts center in two ways. First, there is the hardware, the built environment, which can limit or encourage the arts to expand. The second, and often neglected aspect, is the heartware or the effort to nurture the artistic spirit. Without both components, it is likely that an arts program is going to struggle (Chang and Lee, 2003).

### Hardware: Physical Space

**Versatility.** Ideally, arts spaces encourages creativity. For example, Trubridge (2013) reports that theater has always been somewhat transient which has spurred creativity. He suggests that using spaces like black box theaters will limit the restrictions on the creative process and productions. When using other types of spaces, we may be causing designers to overcome the same challenges every time, creating a similar solution for them. Instead, he suggests having versatile spaces and exploring options for traveling productions.

Laurel Koerner is a professor at Tabor College where a new arts space is nearing completion. She concurs with Trubridge (2013) in an interview from April 10, 2017. She discussed that gallery spaces in the lobby of a performing arts space would be important to consider. She also reports in their case, they chose to create a large lobby with several uses. It could be an art gallery, an event space, and a place for informal student gatherings. A coffee shop is something they decided to include in order to provide employment opportunities on campus and to encourage students to gather and think creatively. Including a kitchen was also a priority in her opinion so that any event could be catered.

Regarding performance spaces, Koerner's comments were supported by Tara Lorence, nearby Columbia Heights school district's Performing Arts chair and a local community member who was interviewed on April 26, 2017. Both artists believe that a black box space is crucial for the creative process. A black box does not have as many restrictions as an auditorium or other space where artists may run into the same barriers each time they design a set or choreograph a dance routine. Koerner shared that a black box space also increases opportunities to partner. Her department is considering partnering with math students who can help engineer an escape room that would be open to the public for a period of time within their black box space. Regardless of the type of space designed, the focus should remain on providing students a learning environment that will promote creativity and then community desires should be incorporated.

**Accessibility.** In email communication from April 25, 2017 with Rose Lindsay, the Latino Community Consultant at Mixed Blood Theater, she suggested taking an audit of the space or designing space that is accessible for individuals with limited mobility. Similarly, an article by Wilson, Bryant, Reynolds, and Lawson (2015), outlined efforts to engage individuals with long term mental and physical disabilities in arts activities (not therapy, just arts activities). They promoted participation by being attentive to physical space needs and by educating other patrons so that they had awareness of how to respond appropriately to people with disabilities visiting the art gallery. They note, "It can be challenging but is best facilitated by the active involvement of disabled people themselves" (Wilson, Bryant, Reynolds, and Lawson, 2015, p. 203). It is essential to get to know and understand this population in order to design space that accommodates needs and helps people of all abilities feel comfortable participating in creative processes and in viewing art.

**Technology.** In an interview conducted with Revive Church conducted on April 18, 2017, the representative reported that the church was happy with their space for their worship services and events. However, they would be interested in utilizing the college's arts space if the lighting and technology were state of the art. They would like to have better technology for concerts when they host them. They saw value in having the space available to the community, though they were uncertain they would need to use it unless hosting a concert. In helping to focus on student needs, Koerner recommended considering what technology will be used by the students in their careers. It is important that they have opportunities to use and design with things that will be available to them professionally so that they are prepared. Lorence also stressed the importance of a light and sound system with separate areas to run the boards from, so as to maximize the types of shows available for the community. She believes that this provides a more authentic feeling for the audience.

## **Heartware: Social Environment and Creative Landscapes**

**Overall Goal.** As suggested a couple of times by Koerner one must, keep the overall goal in mind when negotiating with the community. She suggested inviting input from the community and listening extensively to all perspectives, but she cautioned not to make any guarantees. Ultimately, student learning is the first priority in an educational institution. Below several strategies for engaging the community and prioritizing student learning are outlined.

**Engaging More of the Student Population.** Koerner suggested engaging students and faculty in a few ways. She first suggested promoting engagement through discount tickets for students. For example if they wear their school gear, they could get in for free or reduced price for a night of an art show, concert, or performance. She suggested creating allies out of advisors

so that they encourage their students to engage in shows and activities in the building. On Taber's campus, other students are applying classroom skills by assisting the arts department. The business marketing students are able to promote shows. Similarly, graphic design students design programs and promotional materials for events. Education majors might help inform children's theater activities.

***Engaging the Community through the Arts Programing.*** Koerner suggested that asking local businesses, churches, and other entities to support the arts program even in small ways was a way to help them feel invested and to encourage them to attend events at the new space. This could be that a local business prints the programs, or a local church provides lunch or breakfast during a Q2Q rehearsal. All of these kinds of small activities help the community engage. Lindsay took this a step further in her feedback; Mixed Blood Theater appoints liaisons who can assist in connecting to specific cultural and other communities. They also hire individuals from the neighborhood to encourage others to attend the shows. A program called Radical Hospitality allows the theater to offer free tickets to communities they are trying reach. These variety of engagement techniques help the community invest in their role as stakeholders.

Dr. Teresa TerHaar is a professor at Dordt College, located in a small town where engaging the community is essential was interviewed on April 23. In their local area, engaging the community began with engaging children in children's programing. Koerner also supported this idea; both suggested that engaging children in programing led by students or faculty such as a summer camp, a children's show, or classes was also a way to help parents and grandparents in the door of the arts space. Similarly Lindsay emphasized that their theater has to consider that Latino families do things together, so when reaching out to this community, the theater had to create some family oriented theater even if it is not specifically children's theater.

Koerner and TerHaar both shared in their interviews that reaching outside the local arts community can bring new life to local artists as community members and students. They suggested bringing in outside artists to teach and perform. They also suggested that local artists could be valuable partners in advising, mentoring or engaging in the arts program in other ways.

As discussed above, Wilson et al. (2015), found ways to engage individuals with disabilities in the arts. They educated other patrons and raised awareness of the needs and abilities of those with disabilities. They also did not pressure this community to attend the whole season of activities so as not to overwhelm them. Instead, they incorporated accommodations throughout their season so that individuals felt comfortable attending any session. They concluded that authenticity and patience in the process helped them achieve success.

In an interview with Diamond, a Brooklyn Park community member conducted on March 29, 2017, she asked if the arts programming at the college could incorporate diversity issues and concerns of the local community into their work. Specifically, she stated this could be an opportunity to engage local voices and communities. For example, Diamond stated she would like to see more plays by and for women of color.

When asking community stakeholders about what they would wish to see in a Performing and Fine Arts Center at NHCC, it is important to consider and communicate what “fine arts” means. Cathy, a Brooklyn Park community member, stated that she “would want to know what is included in fine arts programming.”

***Surveying the Community.*** Chang and Lee (2013) conducted a survey on the citizens of Singapore to find out more about how they responded to the arts spaces and programming that the local government was promoting. They chose to lead in depth interviews with nine artists, some well-established and others new arts, to find out how the arts community felt about the

government's involvement and policies. They also conducted a survey of 263 transit riders about the arts scene. This information may be helpful in thinking about the various ways to collect more input in Brooklyn Park.

## **Deliverables**

From the search and community feedback gathered above, it was possible to create some resources that can be used to engage the community as the project moves forward. First, a few questionnaires were developed that can be used to engage with a variety of community members. (See Appendices for deliverables.)



## Discussion of Findings

Findings of the field team were minimal at best when it came to community feedback. The respondent rate was low and not enough questionnaires were returned to determine the effectiveness of the original questionnaire in gathering input. Oral interviews in the community were difficult to obtain, and the few answers gathered indicated a potential lack of desire for future engagement on behalf of the organizations interviewed.

The most definitive factor in obstructing a proper assessment and survey was the approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The team was not initially aware of procedural standards or information about a potential IRB approval, and the process to obtain IRB approval required time and energy. In the academic semester-long timeframe, the process proved problematic in the group's work. IRB approval was not granted until April 13, 2017 leaving little time to reach out to and receive responses from interested stakeholders and community members.

There were numerous factors the team discussed as potential barriers to gathering a sufficient amount of community input. One potential barrier is the perception of the graduate team as "outsiders" disconnected from the community. None of the team members were native to Brooklyn Park or communities nearby. Outsiders "need to build strong relationships with a critical mass of community members-especially opinion leaders, if they are to overcome suspicion and distrust successfully" (Staples, 2001). The team was not aware of the existing community leaders or which leaders would be most directly interested in a performing arts center as a relevant topic. The capacity of the team to efficiently identify student leaders or community leaders interested in a performing arts center was limited perhaps by the perceived differences. For example, a nearby theatre expressed interest only to the extent of determining the role of the new center and subsequently and abruptly terminated communication. The team then focused

efforts on reaching out to student groups to learn about the needs and assets of the college community. However, building a relationship with them was not possible through electronic communication or telephone in the given time frame.

Additionally, the community members identified as potential stakeholders or leaders with a vested interest in the success of the project may not have been the appropriate persons. For example, the faith based organization contacted had little interest in engaging with the center and expressed their programmatic departure from performing arts. The group conducted a literature review and felt the variety of student groups contacted would provide an equitable representation or lead the group to additional sources to engage for interviews and information gathering.

Another limitation of the findings may have been impacted by the ambiguous stage of the current building project. The questionnaire and the oral interviews used conditional phrasing in assessing interest of members on the potential project. The low response rate might have been impacted by the community's awareness that the project is not certain. They may feel more invested in responding if they are certain the project will occur.

Overall, the limitations of the survey circled around the group's capacity to identify key stakeholders who would take interest in the original solicitation email. Without interested stakeholders already identified, the exploratory nature of the project proved useful to highlight unsuccessful methods. For example, electronic and telephone communication were the most feasible options for the team, but they produced minimal results so were not helpful in gaining an overall sense of community interest. As the project moves forward, it is helpful for RCP and other stakeholders to acknowledge the limitations of communication from outside the community. Additionally, the findings uncovered by the group are indicative that many groups in the community appear to feel they are not currently stakeholders.

The above findings and following recommendations, due to low community response, are mainly based on interviews and articles found in the team's best practices research. Because those interviewed are not from or in the Brooklyn Park community, these findings are limited. They are interesting and likely helpful things to assess, but they do not fully account for the diverse needs and assets of the Brooklyn Park community.

## Recommendations

The recommendations for NHCC include both physical aspects of the space and further ideas for community engagement. The physical space should include flexible performance and visual arts spaces, such as a black box theatre and an art gallery. This would allow for creative seating and performance layout to meet the shifting and unique needs of the students and community. High quality technology, specifically a sound system, was also recommended. A prep kitchen would be ideal to cater to cultural integration of food and gathering. More information is needed to ensure the space will meet accessibility needs to offer equitable access.

Community engagement recommendations include creating and maintaining ongoing relationship with community members, artists, churches and local businesses to assure the usefulness of the space for everyone in the community. It would also be ideal to employ local artists as guest artists or adjunct professors to utilize human capital within the community and gain more engagement. Additionally, community members who are not currently engaged in the arts could be engaged through employment or volunteering time or products in order to help them feel invested in the creative process. Engaging the rest of the student body could also generate a similar feeling on campus so that students are more aware of arts events and shows. Through our research we found that engaging children from the community is also highly recommended because it opens doors to other types of engagement.

Language and representation are important aspects to engaging the community. A community member recommended that specifying what “fine arts programming” means to get the best responses. It was also suggested that NHCC support programming that focused on the experiences of people of color, specifically women of color.

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# Appendix A

## Student Groups Contacted

- ASL Club
- Anthropology Club
- Christian Student Organization
- Entrepreneurship Fellow Club
- FMR Soccer Club
- Francophone Student Association
- Hip Hop Culture Club
- Hmong Student club
- Knights of the Quill
- GLBT Club
- Match Club- Kerim
- Multicultural student club
- NHCC Performing Artists and Talent Club
- Oromo student association
- Pan-African Student Association
- Paralegal Student Association
- PTK Club
- Somali Student Association
- Spanish Club
- Student Anime Game Club
- Student Nurses Association
- Student Volunteer Club
- Veteran Student Association
- Vietnamese Student Association

## School Departments Contacted

- Art Exhibits
- Choral Concerts
- Jazz Ensemble and Band Concerts
- Orchestra Ensemble Concerts
- Theatre Productions

## Community Cultural and Arts Organizations Contacted

- Yellow Tree Theatre
- Revive Church
- Living Word Christian Center
- Prairie Seeds Academy
- Noble Academy

## Community Members Contacted

- Diamond
- Cathy

## Best Practices Consultants Contacted

- Laurel Koerner
- Teresa TerHaar
- Rose Lindsay
- Tara Lorence

# Appendix B

## Brooklyn Park Community Observation

### Oral Consent Script:

Hello, my name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I am a graduate student at the University of Minnesota. My team and I are interested in how different cultural groups in the Brooklyn Park area create and experience art and how this vision may be incorporated in the eventual construction of a Performing and Fine Arts Education Center at North Hennepin Community College. By participating in this interview you acknowledge that you are at least 18 years of age. If you agree to participate, I will ask you questions about your personal ideas on art as well as any cultural insight you may be willing to offer. This should take between 5 and 15 minutes. If at any time you don't want to answer one of my questions or continue talking about something, please tell me and we will move on and not go back to it. We can also stop at any time if you wish. For the sake of confidentiality, we will not use your name. though, there is a possibility you may be identifiable via the cultural details in your answers, so please feel free to leave out anything you don't feel comfortable disclosing. Do you have any questions about me, my research, or our interview before we begin?

### Each interviewee will be given a contact card with our advisors contact information and IRB information:

My advisor, Jennifer Blevins of the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota can also be reached as a reference for my research at [blevi013@umn.edu](mailto:blevi013@umn.edu). The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at North Hennepin Community College has approved this research. Questions or comments can also be directed to the Institutional Review Board via:

Deanna Forsman, Ph. D.  
Honors Division Program Director  
763-488-0405  
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### Community Member Interview Questions for Community Assessment that focused on the Arts:

1. Part of our larger project is discussing local arts activities. What arts are being practiced in the community?
2. Do you see people engaging in activities put on by the city and NHCC?
3. What would you like to see for community engagement from the NHCC fine arts program?



# Appendix C

## Community and Student Surveys

### Community Member Interview Questions

1. How are performance arts utilized in your community/culture?
2. What do you wish people knew about the importance of art to you and your community/culture?
3. What is the ideal space for the presentation of artistic expression? (Prompts; seating layout, lighting, size of space, incorporation of food, etc.)
4. What are any improvements you would make to performances spaces you've seen?

### Student Group Survey

You are receiving this questionnaire as a stakeholder group of the City of Brooklyn Park. Your valuable input will be used to submit recommendations on behalf of the Resilient Communities Project and the City of Brooklyn Park to funders for a proposed Performing and Fine Arts Education Center for North Hennepin Community College.

1. Please tell us a little bit about your student group in 2-3 sentences.
2. What physical aspects would a physical space need to contain for your organization to educate the public on your activities or mission (e.g. Walls, rooms, equipment, colors, sounds, etc)?
3. What ties to the arts does your organization contain? Think outside the box; arts can be cultural, physical, humanities-based, liberal, etc.
4. In your opinion, what is the largest barrier to your community engaging with the arts? Remember, arts can be music, sculpting, performing, oral history sharing, etc.
5. If you could tell city planners one thing they need to know about your community, what would it be?