

**Arts Huddles: An Exploration of Advocacy, Marketing and Other Themes  
Led by the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington**

Liz Anderson Simmons

**Executive Summary**

In October 2009 the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington convened a series of Arts Huddles to gather feedback from their constituency on a variety of topics with the goal of creating a stronger and more visible presence for arts and culture in Greater Washington.

Several recommendations emerged from the Arts Huddles:

- Develop a long-term, regional advocacy strategy
- Explore new relationships to build support for arts and culture
- Provide easy access to compelling research
- Develop regional marketing campaigns around themed content
- Encourage collaborations surrounding artistic product
- Convene the field regularly at deeper and broader levels of participation
- Proactively lead and engage the Cultural Alliance constituency

Beyond these suggestions, which were directly addressed by the questions posed in the agenda, two additional themes emerged at all Arts Huddles and across all topics of discussion: the desire to work collaboratively and the need for increased communication within and beyond the arts and culture sector.

**Arts Huddles: An Exploration of Advocacy, Marketing and Other Themes  
Led by the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington**

Liz Anderson Simmons

**Introduction**

In January 2008 the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington convened an *Unconference* at the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at the University of Maryland as an informal gathering of fifty arts leaders who set their own agenda for the daylong discussion. From that conversation came the idea to convene a series of Arts Huddles for the region's cultural sector and suggest ways to create a stronger and more visible presence for arts and culture in Greater Washington.

To that end, the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington organized three Arts Huddles in October 2009. The first was conducted at the Harman Center for the Arts in Washington, DC on October 20; the second was held at Joe's Movement Emporium in Maryland on October 26; and the final Arts Huddle was convened at the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts in Virginia on October 28.

**Methodology**

The steering committee together with the Cultural Alliance staff designed a common agenda to be utilized by each Arts Huddle. Agenda topics included advocacy, marketing and other themes. A Business Volunteer for the Arts consultant skilled in organizational development facilitated each Arts Huddle, and

a team leader guided the facilitators' efforts. Participants were granted the same amount of time to respond to each question, with approximately twenty minutes per question and allowing leeway for responses to naturally wind down before moving on to the next topic. Individuals had a maximum of two minutes to respond to each question to allow for a wide range of responses. Participants were also provided with a note card to write down any additional feedback not voiced during the discussion. Each Arts Huddle totaled 90 minutes in length, and participants stayed up to a half hour afterwards to network with their peers.

### **Demographic Representation**

Attendance at each Arts Huddle varied by location, however, there were multiple jurisdictions represented at each gathering. The DC Arts Huddle was attended by approximately 50 individuals and heavily represented by seasoned arts leaders. The Maryland Arts Huddle was also attended by approximately 50 individuals, but with a strong presence of young, energetic artists. Approximately 65 individuals primarily representing Northern Virginia organizations of all sizes attended the Virginia Arts Huddle.

Despite variations in demographics, disciplines and locales, several common themes emerged across the Arts Huddles. Comments surrounding advocacy encouraged the creation of a long-term strategy with a collective voice and unified messaging, the exploration of new relationships to build support for the

arts, and easily accessible research. With respect to marketing, attendees desired greater visibility through regional marketing campaigns around themed content and the ability to work in partnership while developing artistic product. Many proposed ideas centered on convening the field regularly, both deepening the focus and broadening the outreach of the meetings. Ultimately attendees encouraged the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington to proactively lead and engage their constituency. Beyond these points, which were directly addressed by the questions posed in the agenda, two additional themes emerged in all Arts Huddles and across all topics of discussion: the desire to work collaboratively and the need for increased communication within and beyond the arts and culture sector.

### **Advocacy**

The first item on the agenda opened by asking, “What do we need to do collectively, regionally and within each jurisdiction to build relationships with elected officials, corporations and foundations for arts support?” The overwhelming response from participants at all Arts Huddles was to focus on a long-term, coordinated, and collective approach when developing advocacy strategies. A participant at the Virginia Arts Huddle further stressed the importance of defining the message before planning a tactical approach, and a participant at the Maryland Arts Huddle suggested that Cultural Alliance members agree upon a collective agenda for a specific period of time. Attendees

at all Arts Huddles also zeroed in on the importance of learning about the needs and biases of foundations, corporations and elected officials, and then finding ways to use artistic product and programming to position arts and culture within the context of their vision. Finally, as a former elected official at the Virginia Arts Huddle stressed, representatives want to see partnerships and voter participation; and one effective strategy to show public support of arts programs is to bring a team of citizen supporters to budget hearings.

Participants were also interested in building support for the arts through less traditional partnerships. At the Maryland Arts Huddle, attendees explored the idea of reaching out to individual artists, especially those belonging to live/work communities and who are typically well-connected. Several suggestions emerged from the Virginia Arts Huddle that emphasized tapping into educational opportunities. Participants at the DC Arts Huddle focused on finding community ambassadors to communicate the need for and the value of the arts, an approach that would connect everyday creative activity to the work of professional artists and would focus on communicating the full spectrum of arts participation by ordinary citizens.

Attendees at all Arts Huddles identified the need for hard data, ongoing research, storytelling and ways to make the case for the arts to various stakeholders. Examples of research included economic impact studies and creative economy

research; studies of best practices and specific examples of arts advocacy efforts; and pairing compelling stories with readily available data.

The second discussion item focused on the concept of an Arts Advocacy Day and posed the question, "What would an Art Advocacy Day look like and would your organization participate or benefit?" Responses to this question were divided as to the usefulness of a dedicated Arts Advocacy Day but unified in agreement that if a regional Arts Advocacy Day existed, it would have to be part of a much larger strategy and ongoing effort rather than a single push to bring the arts in front of policymakers. Attendees at the DC Arts Huddle coalesced around the concept that arts advocacy is like "breakfast," meaning something that you make a part of your daily routine. At the Maryland Arts Huddle, participants focused on developing an identity for regional arts advocacy and appointing a recognizable spokesperson to represent the sector. At the Virginia Arts Huddle, one participant suggested that an Arts Advocacy Day would be a wonderful opportunity to allow elected officials to "show off" creative activity happening in their districts.

Both advocacy questions received multiple responses urging the Cultural Alliance to strategically develop a collective voice and define a unified message for the region that could be adapted to the needs of each jurisdiction. Attendees also encouraged the Cultural Alliance to coordinate their efforts with other arts service

organizations in the region to avoid the duplication of effort or the confusion created by conflicting agendas.

## **Marketing**

Arts Huddle attendees posited several examples of best practices in marketing that touched on one or more of the following aspects listed in the agenda:

programming, viral marketing, social networking, fundraising, and convening.

Examples of successful efforts included the Washington National Opera's programming collaboration with the Washington Nationals, National Geographic's partnerships to promote the *Terra Cotta Warriors* exhibit, Artomatic's viral marketing strategies and *Dance is the Answer's* showcase of regional dance programming.

Participants also responded to the follow-up question, "How might a regional or national Greater Washington campaign best serve your needs?" Attendees agreed that competition was primarily external to the sector rather than within it and were supportive of regional marketing efforts focusing on themed content, similar to tourism initiatives such as Restaurant Week. An individual at the Virginia Arts Huddle proposed creating a regional subscription "variety pack" that incorporated programming from multiple arts organizations. Attendees voiced common concern about (and a small dose of nostalgia for) advertising through traditional media outlets, and they emphasized marketing tactics such as social

networking tools, iPhone applications and online advertising with a desire to find the most cost-effective methods of publicizing events.

Participants also focused on marketing with respect to encouraging collaborations on artistic product. Attendees desired opportunities for increased dialogue across organizations and disciplines; specific ideas touched upon electronic communications, resource databases and in-person meetings. At the DC Arts Huddle, an individual proposed convening artistic and marketing staff regularly to discuss upcoming programming planned for three to five years in the future to allow ample time to collaborate.

### **Other Themes**

The final section on the agenda encouraged Arts Huddle attendees to think expansively and asked, “What priorities do you envision for the cultural field over the next two years?” Suggested discussion topics on the agenda included research, collective databases and convening the field. Attendees emphasized convening the field with responses tending to focus in one of two directions: either engaging with each other in greater depth regarding specific topics (e.g. artistic product collaboration or discipline-specific groups) or widening the vision and breadth of events to include individuals not generally associated with the arts, such as athletic representatives, media representatives, politicians and citizens not already engaged in the arts.

Easy access to research was cited as a need during the advocacy discussion, so participants generally did not spend a lot of time discussing research at this point in the Arts Huddle agenda; however, one participant at the DC Arts Huddle requested philanthropic research and an individual at the Maryland Arts Huddle expressed an interest in audience development research. Regarding shared databases, another attendee at the Maryland Arts Huddle suggested creating a database to share marketing lists, citing Atlanta, Georgia and Broward County in Florida as examples, but responses to specific databases were otherwise minimal.

A second question in this section asked, “How can the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington better serve your organization as a strong leader in the field?” One attendee addressed this question on a note card response, encouraging the Cultural Alliance to provide “strong, bold arts leadership,” set priorities for the field, and call their constituency to action. Other attendees made this suggestion more subtly in their responses by implying that the Cultural Alliance could be more anticipatory to the sector’s needs and engage their constituency proactively.

### **Call to Action**

Aside from urging the Cultural Alliance to take the stance of bold, proactive leadership for the arts and culture sector in Greater Washington, two additional



Related to this desire for collaboration is the existing and ongoing need for increased and strategic communication. Attendees repeatedly implied a lack of communication in their feedback; multiple responses proposed courses of action that had already been pursued by the Cultural Alliance, and follow-up comments to best marketing practices were voiced along the lines of “I wish I had known about that because we ...” and “I would have liked to tap into that!” In addition, one participant left a note card addressing an apparent lack of communication by stating, “I [am] concerned that the membership of the alliance and the board of the alliance [are] not connected in any way.” If the Cultural Alliance’s constituency aims to work collectively, effective communication within the community and to external partners becomes absolutely essential.

As a final point, one attendee at the DC Arts Huddle noted that the Cultural Alliance of Greater Washington is well positioned to encourage collaboration. By building on existing relationships and through the development of a communications strategy around advocacy and marketing initiatives, constituents would be afforded the opportunity to engage at a deeper level with each other as well as reach out beyond the sector to form innovative new partnerships and relationships.