



Mecklenburg County

Community Priorities Report

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Prepared For:



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Executive Summary

Introduction

The Arts & Science Council (ASC) mission is ensuring access to an excellent, relevant, and sustainable cultural community for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Region.

ASC partnered with the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute (Urban Institute) to conduct a Community Priorities Study. This study was designed as a community engagement initiative to assess community and stakeholder funding priorities relating to arts and culture. The study included two main components:

1. **The Community Priorities Survey**, which asked members of the cultural community and the public to select their top three of twelve possible funding priorities for arts and culture in Mecklenburg County.
2. **Stakeholder Sessions**, which consisted of three focus groups/workshops for artists, creatives, and arts and cultural organizations in Mecklenburg County.

Community Priorities Survey Key Findings

1. **Respondents had diverse opinions about funding priorities.** There were 1,903 respondents to the Community Priorities Survey. The largest share of respondents (33%) prioritized support for nonprofit arts, science, and history organizations to ensure sustained, high-quality programs and community outreach. Other top priorities included annual field trips (selected by 32% of respondents) and programs that celebrate diverse cultures and neighborhoods (selected by 31% of respondents).
2. **Top funding priorities differed between the public and cultural community.** Public respondents' top funding priority (selected by 34% of the group) was support for programs that celebrate diverse cultures and neighborhoods. Cultural community respondents' top funding priority (selected by 42% of group) was support for nonprofit arts, science, and history organizations to ensure sustained, high-quality programs and community outreach. Both the public and cultural community identified annual grade-level field trips as one of their top three priorities.
3. **There was general support for annual field trips, while funding priorities related to diversity and inclusion differed by race.** A high percentage of respondents with and without children under 18 in their household supported annual grade-level fieldtrips. African Americans more often selected funding priorities related to diversity and inclusion, compared to White respondents.

Stakeholder Session Key Findings

1. Artists, creatives, and arts and cultural organizations identified six main supports that are needed to thrive in their work:
 - Funding-related needs
 - Affordable space
 - Ability to quantify and communicate the value of the arts economy
 - Professional development (e.g. marketing, social media)
 - Directory of artists, organizations, spaces, and events
 - Transparent, inclusive, and equitable access to funding

Background & Methods

Background

Arts & Science Council (ASC) provides advocacy, cultural education programming, cultural planning, fundraising, grant making, public art, workshops, and training to the community. Its mission is ensuring access to an excellent, relevant, and sustainable cultural community for the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Region.

ASC partnered with the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute (Urban Institute) to conduct a Community Priorities Study. This study was designed as a community engagement initiative to assess community and stakeholder funding priorities relating to arts and culture. The study included two main components:

1. The Community Priorities Survey
2. Stakeholder Sessions

Community Priorities Survey

The Community Priorities Survey was conducted to better understand Mecklenburg County residents' priorities relating to arts and culture. The survey process included:

1. **Identifying funding priorities.** ASC Stakeholders, including Culture Blocks representatives and ASC staff, met to identify possible funding priorities. Twelve funding priorities were identified and can be found in the Community Priorities Survey Results section on page 10. Survey respondents were asked to select up to three of the 12 funding priorities, or select and write-in their own response under "other."
2. **Gathering responses online from the Cultural Community and the Public.** Once the funding priorities were finalized, the survey was sent to two distinct stakeholder groups: the cultural community and the public. To engage the cultural community (Mecklenburg residents in ASC's databases, including grant recipients and arts patrons), emails were sent through ASC listservs. To engage and secure responses from the public (residents that were not in ASC's database), the survey was publicized through various outlets such as QCityMetro.com, Hola, Queen City Nerve, CLTure.org and others as well as Facebook Ads. Responses from the public were also secured during ASC's Connect with Culture Day and through survey distribution requests to influencers and community organizations outside of the arts and culture sector. Data collection for the survey took place from January 27th to February 29th, 2020.
3. **Gathering responses in-person at Open Houses.** In-person Open House events were also organized to engage the public, specifically residents who may not traditionally participate or have access to community engagement efforts. The Urban Institute, ASC staff, and performers attended five Open Houses in geographically diverse areas of the county. Open Houses took place at Charlotte Bilingual Preschool, Ada Jenkins Center, UCity Family Zone, West Boulevard Public Library, and the Matthews Community Center.



Survey station at the West Boulevard Public Library.

Stakeholder Sessions

Stakeholder sessions were conducted to better understand the strengths and needs of the arts sector, and funding priorities of individual artists, creatives, and organizations in Mecklenburg County. Three sessions took place between February 18th and February 28th, 2020.

Session 1: Artist and Organizations Focus Group

A focus group took place at Dupp & Swat and included four participants who were either individual artists or staff at arts and cultural organizations.

Session 2: Arts and Cultural Organizations Workshop

The first workshop took place at Charlotte Art League and included 14 participants from organizations from a diverse range of fields, including performance art, music, and film.

Session 3: Individual Artists and Creatives Workshop. The second workshop took place at Covenant Presbyterian Church and included 10 participants from a range of backgrounds, including performance art, visual art, and literature.

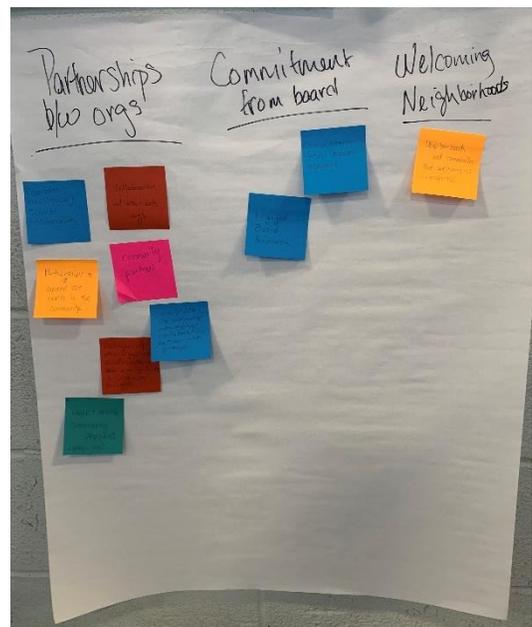


Session 2 stakeholders discuss needs and strengths of the cultural community at the Charlotte Art League.

Session 1 was conducted as a focus group due to the smaller number of participants. Sessions 2 and 3 were facilitated as workshops and included a variety of interactive activities. All sessions sought to gather stakeholder feedback related to the following questions:

1. How are artists, creatives, and arts and cultural organizations currently feeling supported in the community?
2. What types of support do artists, creatives, and arts and cultural organizations need to thrive in Mecklenburg County?
3. What are the strengths and challenges of ASC's current grant-making process?

More information on specific activities used during Sessions 2 and 3 can be found starting on page 16.



Stakeholders list ways that they are currently feeling supported in the community.

Community Priorities Survey

Demographic Characteristics

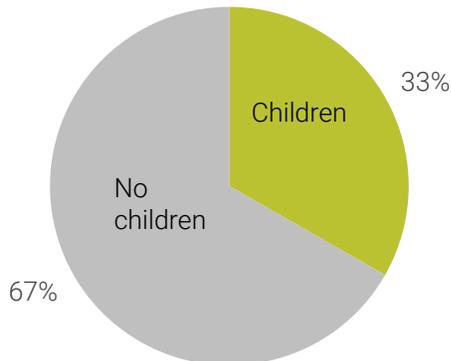
The Community Priorities Survey included 1,903 valid responses.¹ The demographic characteristics of these respondents can be found on the following pages.

There were

1,903

valid survey responses

Respondents with children under 18 years in their household



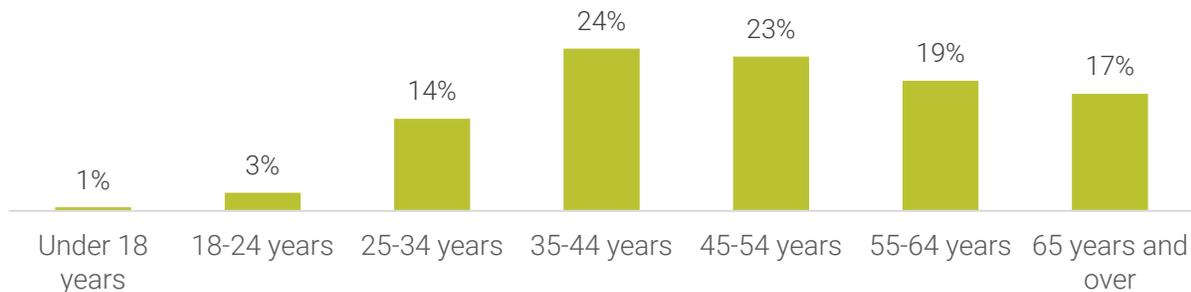
17%

had lived in Mecklenburg 5 years or less, while

43%

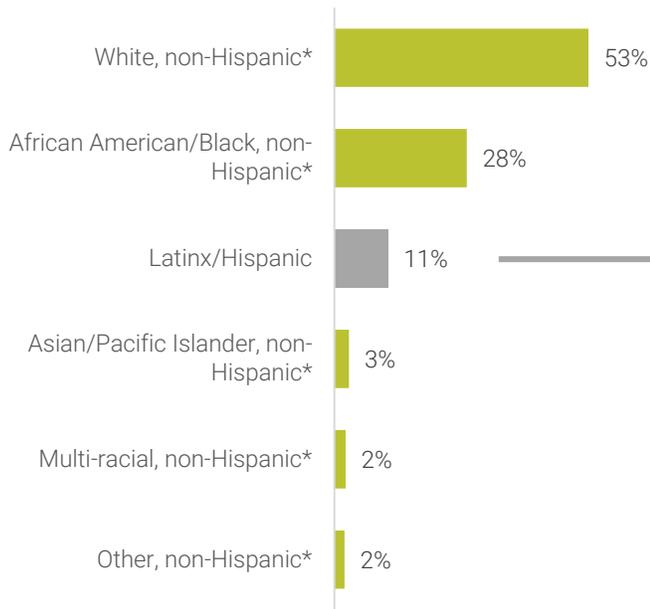
had lived in Mecklenburg for 20 years or more

Respondent Age

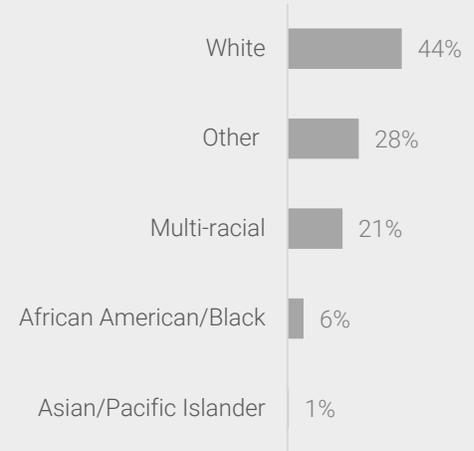


¹ Responses were considered invalid if the respondent lived outside of Mecklenburg County or did not select at least one funding priority on the survey.

Respondent Race and Ethnicity



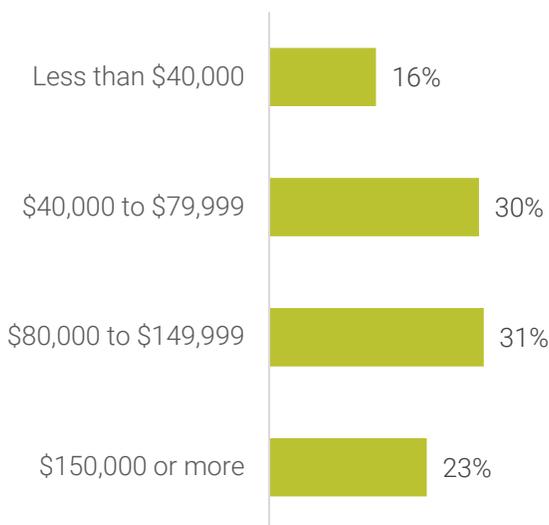
Latinx/Hispanic respondents, by race



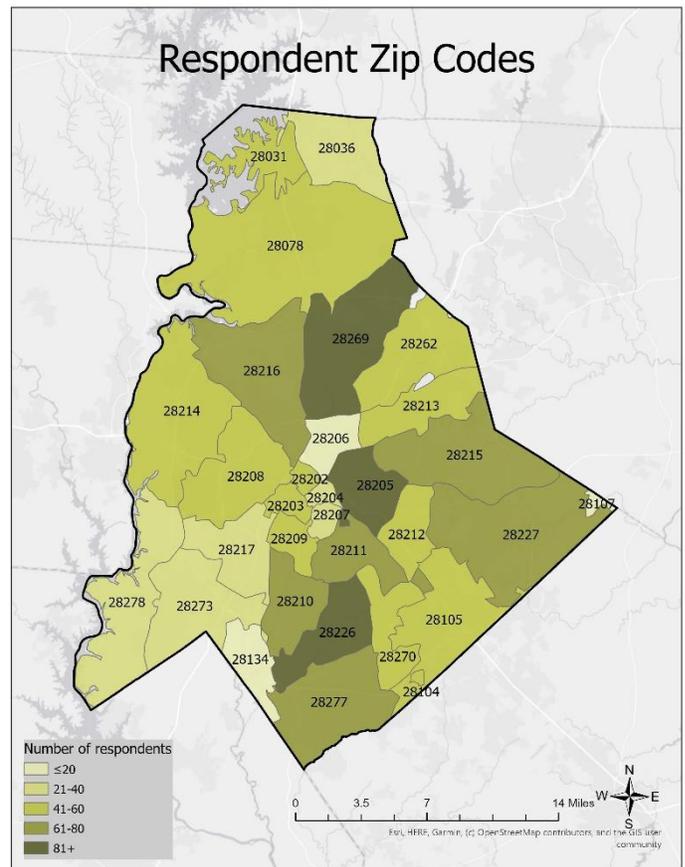
Note: Most (79%) of Latinx/Hispanic respondents who indicated "other" for race wrote in their ethnicity (e.g. Latino, Hispano, Columbian). The remaining respondents who selected "other" did not specify a race.

*Race and ethnicity were asked as two separate questions on the survey but were combined for analysis. In the graph above, races are reported for respondents who selected "not Latinx or Hispanic." All participants who selected Latinx or Hispanic, regardless of race, are listed above as Latinx/Hispanic. The self-identified races of Latinx or Hispanic individuals are shown in the graph to the right.

Family Income



Respondent Zip Codes



Community Priorities Survey

Public vs. Cultural Community Characteristics

The Community Priorities Survey includes responses from the cultural community (those reached through ASC or cultural organization databases) and the public (those outside of ASC's database, see page 5 for recruitment details). Due to the anonymous and primarily online nature of the survey distribution, it is likely that there was some cross-over between the intended audience and the actual audience for the two survey versions.

Compared to the cultural community respondents, **public respondents were more racially and economically diverse and more similar to Mecklenburg County census demographics.** Table 1 shows the racial, ethnic, and economic differences between the respondents, compared to population estimates from the U.S. Census.

$$\begin{array}{ccc} \text{Total Valid Responses} & & \text{Cultural Community Responses} & & \text{Public Responses} \\ 1,903 & = & 730 & + & 1,173 \end{array}$$

Table 1: Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Characteristics by Respondent Type

Respondent Characteristic	Total Respondents (n=1,903)	Cultural Community Respondents (n=730)	Public Respondents (n=1,173)	Mecklenburg County US Census*
White, non-Hispanic	53%	71%	42%	46%
African American/Black, non-Hispanic	28%	18%	34%	31%
Latinx/Hispanic	11%	5%	15%	14%
Family income under \$40,000	16%	10%	20%	30%
Family income above \$150,000	23%	29%	19%	16%

*Race/ethnicity data from the US Census American Community Survey 2018 1-year estimates; Household Income data from the American Community Survey 2013-2018 5-year estimates.

Community Priorities Survey

Results: All Responses

Results from the Community Priorities Survey indicate that respondents had diverse opinions about funding priorities. The largest share of respondents (33%) prioritized support for nonprofit arts, science, and history organizations to ensure sustained, high-quality programs and community outreach. Other top priorities included annual field trips (selected by 32% of respondents) and programs that celebrate diverse cultures and neighborhoods (selected by 31% of respondents). Chart 1 shows the percent of respondents who selected each funding priority. Residents could select up to three priorities of the twelve, or they could write-in a response under “other” as one of their three selections.

Write-in responses to “other,” included, but was not limited to, programming for specific populations (e.g. elderly, Hispanic), specific types of arts (e.g. film, theater, music), and additional space for viewing and promoting arts and culture.

The twelve choices below have been identified as possible funding priorities for arts and culture in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. Which THREE priorities are the most important to you? Support for:

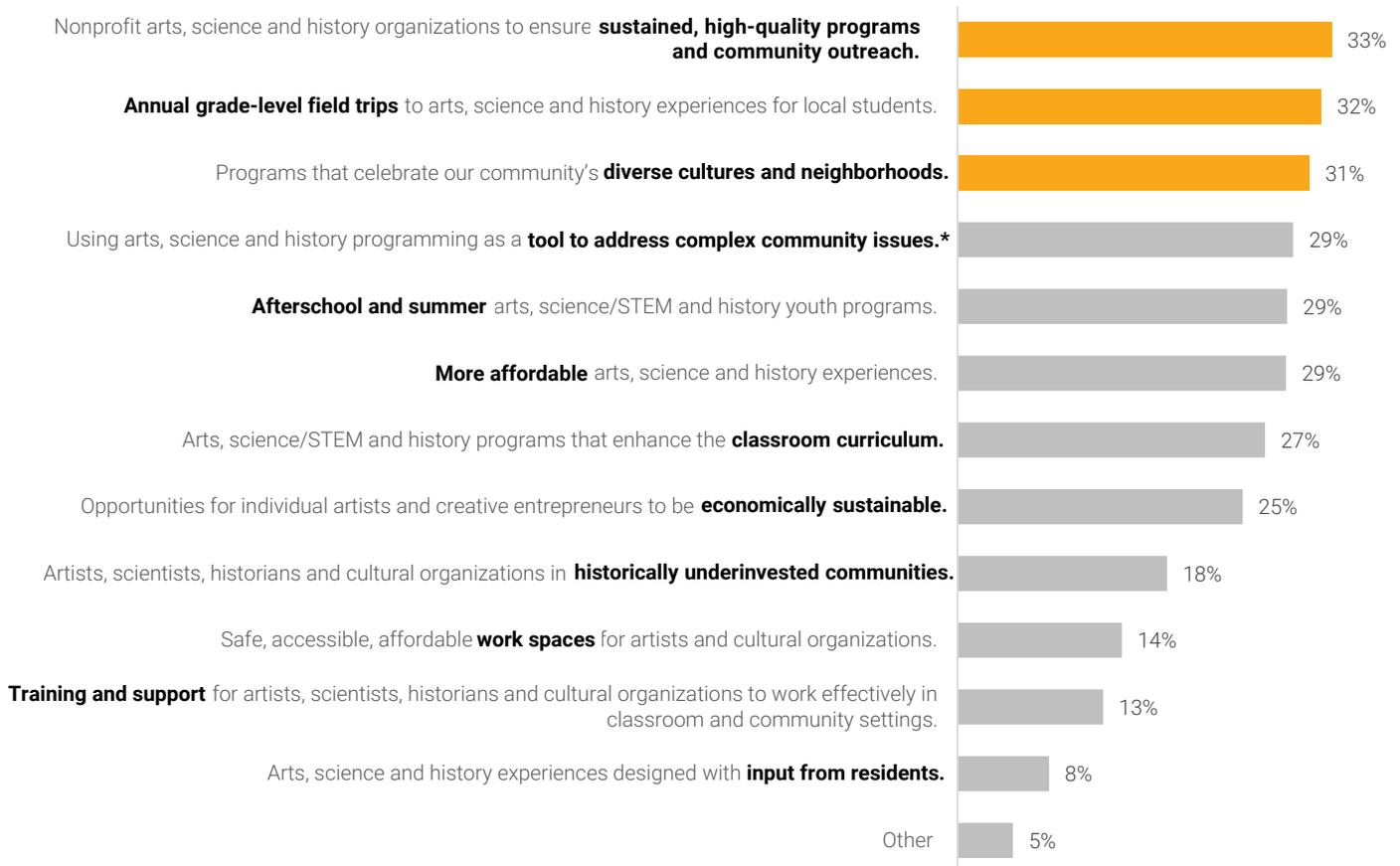


Chart 1: Responses to the Community Priorities Survey, by percent of respondents who selected each funding priority. Respondents could select up to three funding priorities. Total valid responses= 1,903.

*Racial and economic disparities, environmental sustainability, and public safety were given as examples of complex community issues in the survey.

Community Priorities Survey

Results: Public vs. Cultural Community

To determine whether differences existed between the public and cultural community respondents, results were separated by stakeholder group. Public respondents' top funding priority was support for programs that celebrate diverse cultures and neighborhoods. Thirty-four percent of public respondents prioritized programs that celebrate diverse cultures, compared to 26% of cultural community respondents. This response difference was statistically significant, meaning that results show a meaningful difference between the prioritization preferences of the two stakeholder groups. Cultural community respondents' top funding priority was support for nonprofits to ensure sustained, high quality programs and community outreach. Forty-two percent of cultural community respondents prioritized support for nonprofits to ensure sustained programs, compared to 27% of public respondents; this difference was also statistically significant. Both the public and cultural community identified annual grade-level field trips as one of their top three funding priorities. Public respondents indicated higher support for afterschool and summer youth programming than cultural community respondents. This may be due to by the higher percent of public respondents with children under 18 in the home (40% of public vs. 23% of cultural community respondents).

Public's top funding priority relates to celebrating diversity, while cultural community top priority is sustaining nonprofit programs and community outreach

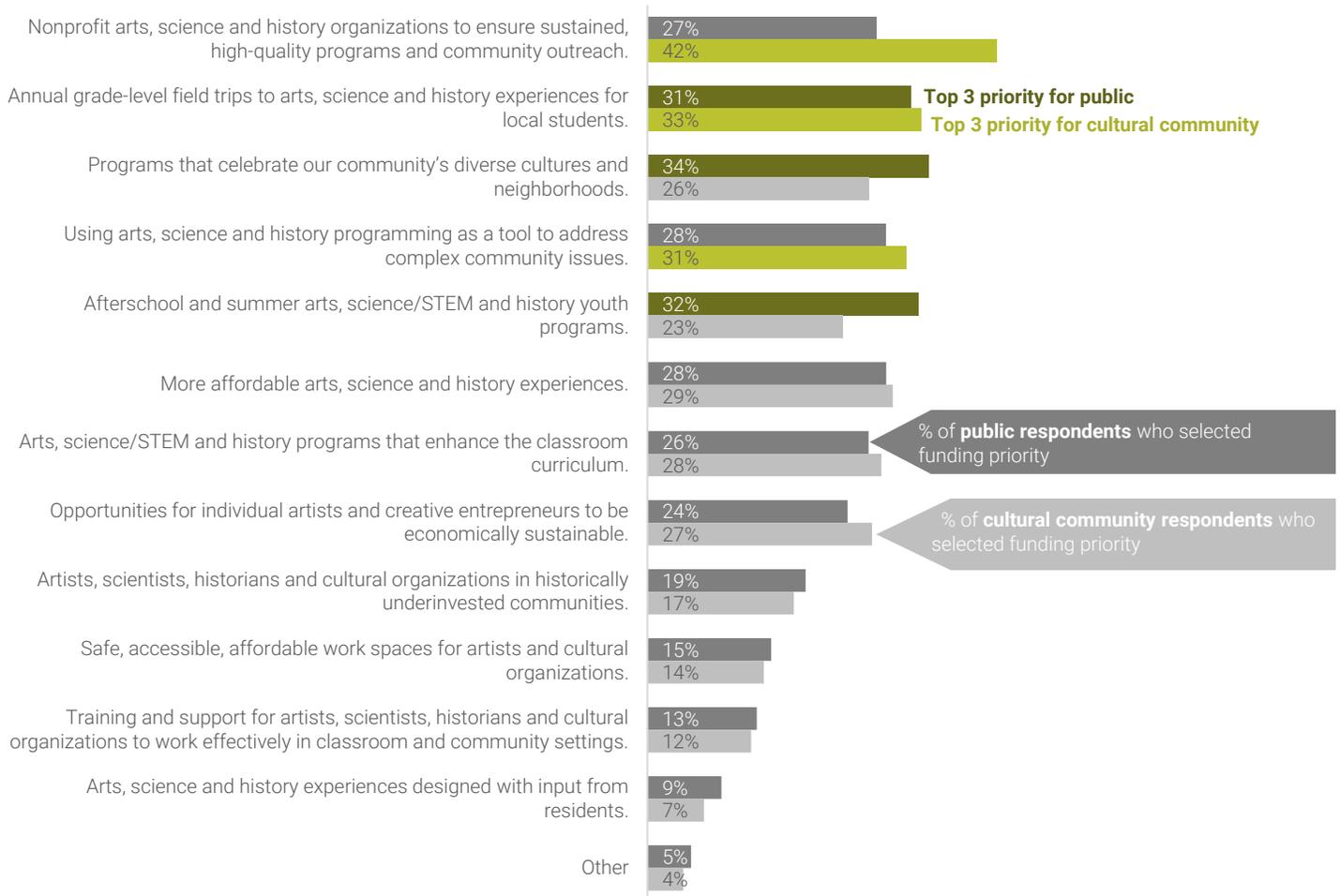


Chart 2: Responses to the Community Priorities Survey, by stakeholder type. Respondents could select up to three funding priorities. Cultural community responses= 730; public responses=1,173.

Community Priorities Survey

Results: Demographic Trends

Results from the Community Priorities Survey were further examined to determine whether there were demographic trends among the funding priorities. The key findings are below.

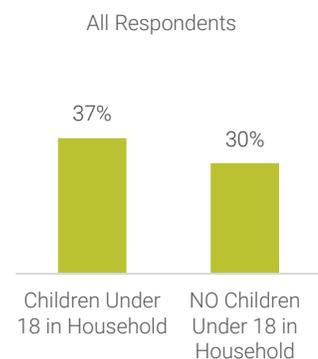
1. **Annual field trips were a high priority, regardless of parenting status.** Annual field trips were ranked as the 1st priority for those with children under 18 in the household (37% prioritized), while annual field trips were ranked 4th for respondents with no children under 18 in the household (30% prioritized). To determine whether differences existed between public and cultural community respondents, the findings were separated by stakeholder group. The results in Table 2 show that regardless of stakeholder group, respondents with children under 18 showed high support for annual level field trips. Cultural community respondents without children under 18 indicated higher support for annual field trips than public respondents without children.

Overall, respondents supported children’s access to arts and culture education. Sixty-two percent of all respondents prioritized one or more of the three funding priorities relating to students’ education (annual field trips, afterschool and summer programs, and/or classroom programs).

Table 2. Percent of respondents who selected support for:

Annual grade-level field trips to arts, science and history experiences for local students.

	Children Under 18 in Household	NO Children Under 18 in Household
All Respondents	37%	30%
Public Respondents	37%	28%
Cultural Community Respondents	36%	32%

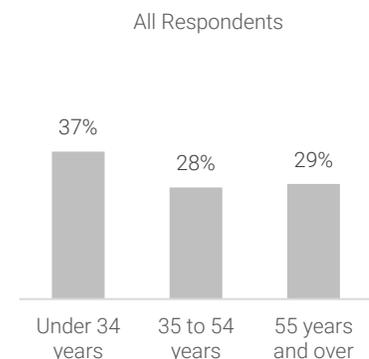


2. **More than other age groups, younger respondents (ages 34 and under) want to use arts, science, and history programming as a tool to address complex community issues.**

Table 3. Percent of respondents who selected support for:

Using arts, science and history programming as a tool to address complex community issues.

	Under 34 years	35 to 54 years	55 years and over
All Respondents	37%	28%	29%
Public Respondents	36%	26%	27%
Cultural Community Respondents	41%	30%	30%



3. **African Americans were significantly more likely to prioritize funding areas relating to diversity and inclusion than White respondents.** For example, 44% of African American respondents prioritized programs that celebrate diverse cultures and neighborhoods, compared to 23% of White respondents. Latinx respondents were also more likely to prioritize programs that celebrate diverse cultures and neighborhoods than White respondents. This racial/ethnic trend was seen among both public and cultural community respondents (Tables 4-6).

All Respondents

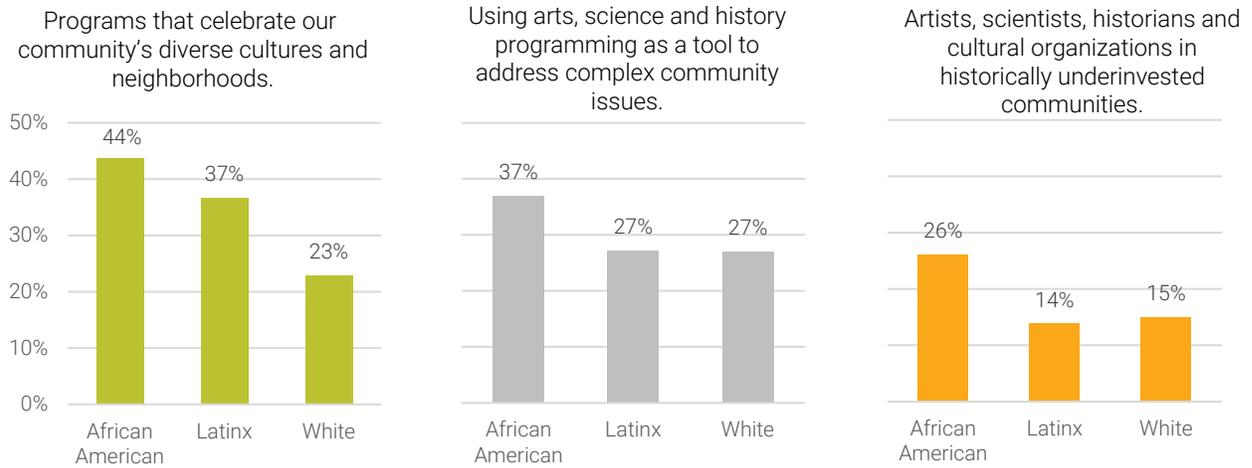


Table 4. Percent of respondents who selected support for:

Programs that celebrate our community's diverse cultures and neighborhoods.

	African American	Latinx	White
All Respondents	44%	37%	23%
Public Respondents	42%	37%	25%
Cultural Community Respondents*	48%	33%	21%

*Due to the small sample size of African American and Latinx cultural community respondents, comparisons of race/ethnicity across cultural community respondents should be interpreted with caution.

Table 5. Percent of respondents who selected support for:

Using arts, science and history programming as a tool to address complex community issues.

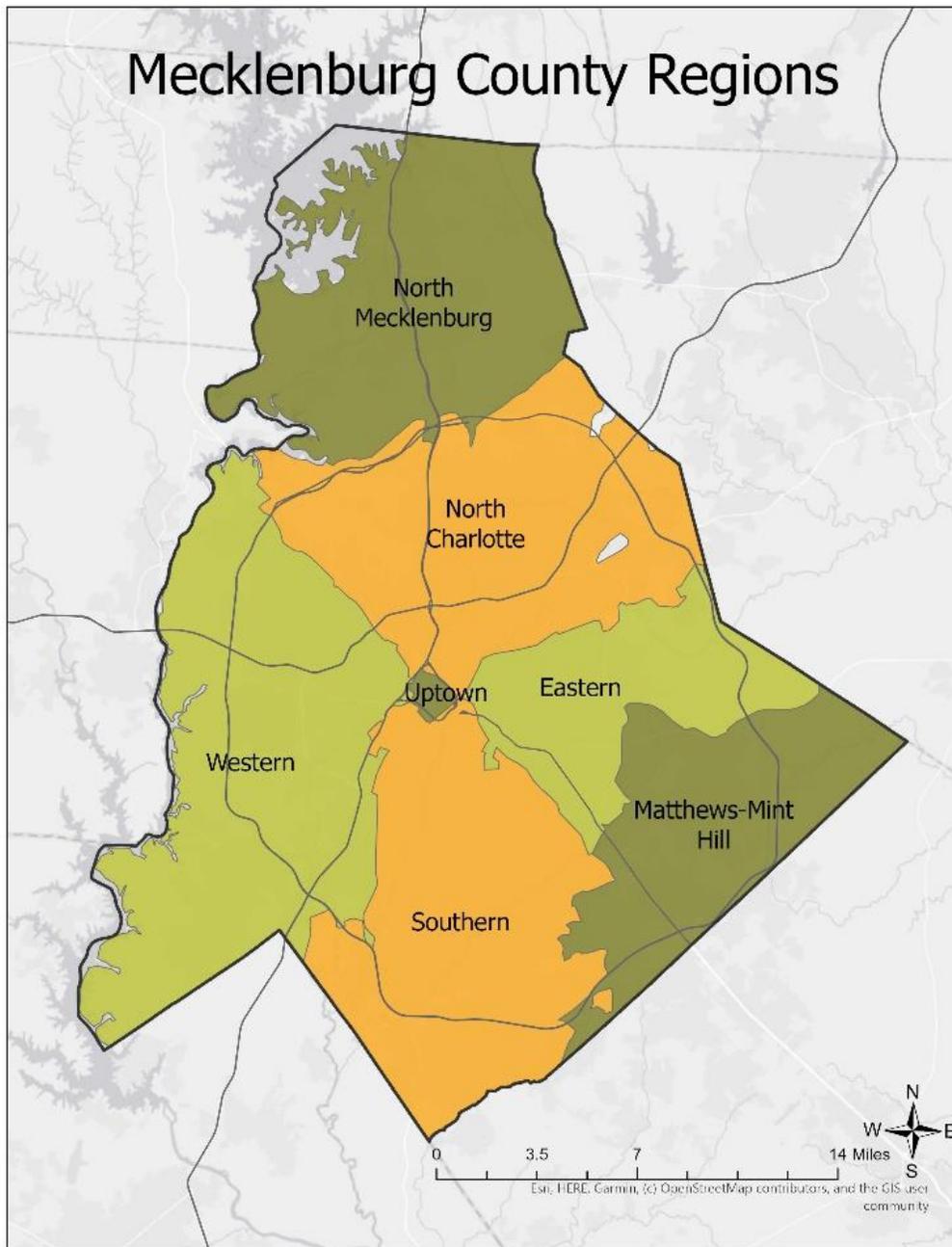
	African American	Latinx	White
All Respondents	37%	27%	27%
Public Respondents	35%	28%	26%
Cultural Community Respondents	42%	25%	28%

Table 6. Percent of respondents who selected support for:

Artists, scientists, historians and cultural organizations in historically underinvested communities.

	African American	Latinx	White
All Respondents	26%	14%	15%
Public Respondents	23%	12%	16%
Cultural Community Respondents	32%	25%	14%

4. **Top priorities varied by county region.** In order to identify geographic trends, zip codes were recoded to create seven Mecklenburg County regions: Uptown, Eastern, Southern, Western, North Charlotte, North Mecklenburg, and Matthews-Mint Hill. Four regions (North Mecklenburg, Uptown, Southern, and Matthews-Mint Hill) identified support for nonprofits to ensure sustained, high-quality programs and community outreach as their top funding priority. The Western and North Charlotte regions identified programs that celebrate the community's diverse cultures and neighborhoods as their top funding priority. This is primarily attributed to the racial diversity of respondents in these regions, where 50% or more of respondents were African American. Respondents in the Eastern region indicated that their top priority was support for opportunities for individual artists and creative entrepreneurs to be economically sustainable. The top 3 priorities for each region are shown on page 15.



Regional Top 3 Priorities

by percent of respondents who selected each funding priority.

Responses shown are for all respondents.

	North Charlotte (Respondents=300)	North Mecklenburg (Respondents=139)
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Programs that celebrate our community's diverse cultures and neighborhoods (37%). 2. Afterschool and summer arts, science/STEM and history youth programs (36%). 3. Using arts, science and history programming as a tool to address complex community issues (34%). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nonprofit arts, science and history organizations to ensure sustained, high-quality programs and community outreach (41%). 2. Programs that celebrate our community's diverse cultures and neighborhoods (31%). 3. Opportunities for individual artists and creative entrepreneurs to be economically sustainable (28%).
Western (Respondents=192)	Uptown (Respondents=57)	Eastern (Respondents=275)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Programs that celebrate our community's diverse cultures and neighborhoods (40%). 2. More affordable arts, science and history experiences (35%). 3. Afterschool and summer arts, science/STEM and history youth programs (31%). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nonprofit arts, science and history organizations to ensure sustained, high-quality programs and community outreach (44%). 2. More affordable arts, science and history experiences (33%). 3. Annual grade-level field trips to arts, science and history experiences for local students (30%). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Opportunities for individual artists and creative entrepreneurs to be economically sustainable (35%). 2. Nonprofit arts, science and history organizations to ensure sustained, high-quality programs and community outreach (34%). 3. Using arts, science and history programming as a tool to address complex community issues (34%).
	Southern (Respondents=525)	Matthews-Mint Hill (Respondents=124)
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nonprofit arts, science and history organizations to ensure sustained, high-quality programs and community outreach (37%). 2. Annual grade-level field trips to arts, science and history experiences for local students (37%). 3. Arts, science/STEM and history programs that enhance the classroom curriculum (30%). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nonprofit arts, science and history organizations to ensure sustained, high-quality programs and community outreach (36%). 2. More affordable arts, science and history experiences. (36%). 3. Programs that celebrate our community's diverse cultures and neighborhoods (35%).

Zip codes included in each region:

- **North Charlotte:** 28269, 28262, 28213, 28206, 28216
- **North Mecklenburg:** 28078, 28036, 28031
- **West:** 28278, 28273, 28217, 28208, 28214
- **Uptown:** 28202
- **East:** 28215, 28212, 28205
- **South:** 28277, 28270, 28226, 28211, 28210, 28209, 28207, 28204, 28203, 28134
- **Matthews-Mint Hill:** 28227, 28107, 28105, 28104

Stakeholder Sessions Findings

Current Supports

Stakeholder sessions were conducted to better understand the strengths and needs of the arts sector, and priorities of individual artists, creatives, and organizations in Mecklenburg County. Three sessions took place:

- [Session 1](#): Artist and Organizations Focus Group
- [Session 2](#): Arts and Cultural Organizations Workshop
- [Session 3](#): Individual Artists and Creatives Workshop

Stakeholders in each of the three sessions were asked to respond to the prompt “**How are artists, creatives, and arts and cultural organizations currently feeling supported in the community?**”

Stakeholders in Session 1 discussed the prompt in a focus-group format. Stakeholders in Sessions 2 and 3 were asked to first independently, and then as a group, brainstorm responses to the prompt. Responses were then written on post-it notes and grouped by theme. Major themes from the three sessions are discussed below.

Support from ASC

Stakeholders in Sessions 1, 2, and 3 identified ASC as an important source of support. Participants identified various grant programs from which they were receiving financial support (e.g. Cultural Vision, Regional Artist Project Grant). Stakeholders also noted that ASC’s grant workshops are an effective and helpful way to learn about funding options. ASC staff were perceived as responsive and helpful in answering questions about grants, reviewing grants, and providing feedback on funding decisions. Beyond funding, participants noted that ASC plays an important role in convening artists, broadening networks, and creating opportunities for collaboration between organizations, which some indicated was an even more important source of support than the financial support they received.

Other Supports

Stakeholders identified a variety of partnerships, opportunities, spaces, and networks where they felt supported in their work. Individual artists (Session 1 and 3) emphasized the importance of artist networks as a source of emotional support and collaboration. Artists (Session 3) also identified specific spaces and residency programs that have been important to their work. Organizations (Session 2) emphasized the importance of a wide range of partnerships.

Table 7: Ways that Artists and Organizations Currently Feel Supported

Organizations (Session 2):	Artists and Creatives (Session 3):	
Partnerships	Space	Networks
Other arts and cultural organizations	Charlotte Lit	CLTextile
ASC	C3 Lab	C3 Artists Chats
Thrive Fund	Goodyear Arts	Charlotte Writers Club
Corporate sponsors	McColl Center for Art + Innovation	NC Writers Network
Volunteers	Elder Gallery of Contemporary Art	ASC-hosted collaboratives
Engaged board members	Hodges Taylor	Sherwood Ave. painting group
Artists who participate in exhibits and other collaborations	Spirit Square	Like-minded communities such as black women’s and business groups
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools	Public Libraries	Social justice/arts group
Individual Donors	Hannah Blanton Sozo Gallery	
	CPC Art Galleries	

Stakeholder Session Findings

Current Needs

Stakeholders were also asked “**What types of support do artists, creatives, and arts and cultural organizations need to thrive in Mecklenburg County?**”

Stakeholders in Session 1 discussed the prompt in a focus-group format. Stakeholders in Sessions 2 and 3 were asked to first independently, and then as a group, brainstorm responses to the prompt. After needs were identified and discussed, Session 2 and 3 stakeholders were asked to select their top three needs. Organizations who had more than one representative present were asked to work with their colleagues to identify their organization’s top needs. At the end of the activity, stakeholders had an opportunity to identify possible solutions to the top-voted needs.

A diverse range of needs were discussed over the three sessions. Six main themes emerged for participating artists and organizations. These six themes are highlighted in green in Table 8 and are discussed further in the following pages.

The needs identified by each of the sessions are shown in the leftmost column. Needs which were discussed in the Session 1 focus group are noted accordingly. The numbers displayed in the Session 2 and 3 columns indicate the number of times the need was prioritized by participating stakeholders. Needs that were only discussed but not prioritized by a stakeholder are noted. Cells with a “ - ” were not identified as needs in the session.

Table 8: Needs Identified and Prioritized, by Session

Identified Needs*	Session 1 Themes (Focus Group)	Session 2 Priorities (Organizations)	Session 3 Priorities (Artists)
Funding-related needs	Discussed	11	6
Affordable space	Discussed	7	6
Ability to quantify and communicate the value of the arts economy	-	4	6
Professional development (e.g. marketing, social media)	Discussed	2	4
Directory of artists, organizations, spaces, and events	Discussed	Discussed	4
Transparent, inclusive, and equitable access to funding	Discussed	3	1
Support for local collaborations (e.g. funding opportunities, shared space)	-	1	2
Government support (e.g. affordable rentals, event promotion)	Discussed	2	-
Corporate champions, trained board members	-	2	-
Transportation/accessibility	-	1	-
Streamlined grant process	Discussed	Discussed	-
Inclusive training	-	Discussed	-
Internal technology (e.g. computers, software)	-	Discussed	-
Shared operating support services	-	Discussed	1
Mentorship program	Discussed	-	-
Connections to schools and universities	Discussed	-	-

*Note: For the purpose of comparison, some needs were combined and reworded from the wording used in the original workshops. For example, Session 3 stakeholders identified process space and performance space as distinct needs, but the need was condensed into a single need (affordable space) for the purpose of comparison across groups.

Funding-related Needs

Funding-related needs were a recurring theme throughout the sessions. Conversations regarding funding primarily focused on the desire for more grant funding and the need for a dedicated revenue stream for the arts. Stakeholders in Session 2 and 3 noted that the ability to obtain a consistent revenue stream is tied to the cultural community's ability to quantify, communicate, and advocate for the value of an arts economy to city leaders.

Stakeholders in all sessions specifically noted the need for more unrestricted operational funding to cover day-to-day operations and replace outdated technology and equipment. Others noted the need for more school-based funding, specifically funding to employ teachers and engage children during the summer. Finally, others identified a need for more collaborative grant opportunities.

Stakeholders in Sessions 2 brainstormed possible steps towards addressing funding-related needs:

- Continue to advocate and partner with local government officials to develop a local revenue stream (e.g. hotel and tourism tax) for the arts.
- Pursue creative partnership with private entities.

Affordable Space

Artists and organizations in all three sessions identified the need for more affordable space, specifically affordable space outside of uptown.

Stakeholders in Sessions 1 and 2 expressed that it was a difficult process to work with schools and other organizations and agencies to rent space at an affordable price. Stakeholders specifically noted that high rental costs and difficulty in obtaining permissions were barriers to renting space in, and collaborating with, schools. As one arts organization representative explained "schools and arts should be in collaboration, not competition," noting that arts can be a conduit for economic and social mobility, particularly in underprivileged areas. In addition to government-owned space, arts and cultural organizations in Session 2 discussed the need to connect and partner with developers and other private entities for space-related needs.

Artists in Session 3 echoed the need for affordable space outside of uptown, and distinguished between the need for affordable performance space and process space. Process space was defined as space where artists can rehearse or create their artistic product, whereas performance space was defined as spaces where artists could perform or display their art. Both types of space are important and needed. One artist noted that some grant funding can only be used to pay artists for their performances, and restricts artists from using grant funding to pay for process space or rehearsal time.

Stakeholders in Sessions 2 and 3 brainstormed possible steps towards addressing space related needs:

- Allow the cultural community to utilize government subsidies or tax abatement for underutilized and unused spaces in neighborhoods and communities around Mecklenburg County.
- Regulate government pricing for city/county/school buildings, especially during underutilized times (e.g. school buildings in the summer).
- Advocate with local leaders for representation in the City of Charlotte's 2040 Comprehensive Plan.
- Create a directory for space sharing in order to; 1) increase knowledge of low-cost options; and 2) create a platform in which space can be traded, donated, or requested.

Ability to Quantify and Communicate the Value of the Arts Economy

“Are arts organizations doing enough to exemplify the importance of art to Charlotte?” This question was posed by an organization in Session 2 and also echoed by artists in Session 3. Stakeholders in both sessions shared the desire to educate and expand residents’ and policy makers’ views about the economic value of arts. Stakeholders noted that the arts economy is an important conduit for social justice advocacy. Furthermore, the arts economy creates opportunities for economic mobility, both by increasing creative talent in the workforce and by investing in children who may otherwise lack access to the arts. Artists in Session 3 noted that artists and creatives can play an important role in bringing creative talent to the public and private sector. For example, local government could contract with artists to create a public health campaign. This both increases the creative capacity of local government and creates a sustainable funding stream for local artists. Stakeholders in Session 2 and 3 noted that the cultural community must be able to quantify, communicate, and advocate for the value of an arts economy to the public and to city leaders in order to successfully obtain new and consistent sources of revenue.

Stakeholders in Session 2 expressed a nuanced view of how arts economy messaging should be communicated. Stakeholders desired to have a unified message that the cultural community and supporters could promote. However, stakeholders felt that this unified message should be developed with the input of organizations and marketed using diverse voices and perspectives from within the cultural community.

Stakeholders in Sessions 2 and 3 brainstormed possible steps towards addressing the need to quantify and communicate the value of the arts economy:

- Gather multiple perspectives on the value of the arts (e.g. students, geographic communities, funders) to use in marketing and messaging.
- Increase awareness for the mutual benefits of cross-sector partnerships between artists and public and private industry.
- Train artists, organizations, teachers, students, and other arts advocates in how to lobby.
- Advocate for the arts economy to local representatives.

Professional Development

Stakeholders in all three sessions identified the need for various types of training and professional development. In particular, stakeholders discussed the challenges of working within the changing media landscape and emphasized the need for marketing and social media training. In Session 2, organizations mentioned that media and social media skills are needed to create positive media presence and network effectively with influencers and media outlets. Stakeholders had differing opinions regarding working with the media. Some thought that media outlets are now more willing than ever to cover artistic programs and events (Session 1 and 2). Others commented that it has become more difficult to publicize events, in part because of the loss of paid arts and culture writers at local news agencies (Session 3). In Session 3, artists identified additional professional development needs such as grant-writing and opportunities for professional critique.

Directory of Artists, Organizations, Spaces, and Events

Stakeholders in Sessions 1, 2, and 3 discussed the need for an online directory for finding collaborators, marketing events, and identifying affordable space. Stakeholders noted that while platforms do exist in niche areas, there is a need for a comprehensive platform that can be the “go to” resource for both the Mecklenburg County cultural community and the public.

Transparent, Inclusive, and Equitable Access to Funding

Stakeholders in Sessions 1 and 2 discussed the desire to better understand how and where ASC funding is allocated. Inclusive and equitable access to funding opportunities was an important need to one stakeholder in Session 3. Additional feedback on the ASC grant-making process is discussed in the next section.

Stakeholder Sessions Findings

Grant-making Process

Stakeholders in each of the three sessions were asked to respond to a series of prompts related to the central question: **“What are the strengths and challenges of ASC’s current grant-making process?”**

Stakeholders in Session 1 discussed the prompt in a focus-group format. Stakeholders in Sessions 2 and 3 first discussed the prompts at individual tables, and then discussed main themes as a larger group. The key findings are discussed below.

Strengths of the Grant-Making Process

Stakeholders in Sessions 1, 2, and 3 agreed that ASC staff are one of the most important strengths of the grant-making process. Stakeholders explained that staff were helpful, accessible, and generous with feedback on grant applications and grant decisions. Stakeholders also noted that the ASC grant workshops were helpful for exploring and understanding grant options, though not all stakeholders were aware that these workshops were available. Individual artists in Sessions 1 and 3 liked the brevity and accessibility of the Culture Blocks application. One stakeholder commented that the ease of the Culture Block application encouraged first-time grant writers to continue to pursue new and bigger grants. Stakeholders also noted that there has been an increase in opportunities for small organizations and individual artists to work in communities as a result of Culture Blocks.

Challenges of the Grant-Making Process

Culture Blocks

Stakeholders supported the Culture Blocks Program, but expressed a desire to see the program expanded and some restrictions lifted. For example, a Culture Block grant recipient in Session 3 shared an experience in which she wanted to take her students on a field trip to a museum outside of the designated geographic blocks, but was unable due to the geographic restrictions of the program. Other stakeholders highlighted specific neighborhoods and communities that they would like to work in but that are not included within the Culture Blocks boundaries.

Grant Applications

One of the most frequently cited challenges of grant-based funding was the (unfunded) time and talent required to write successful grants. One artist shared that this was a particular challenge when different ASC grant applications are due at or near the same time. Newer grant-writers discussed the high learning curve for grant-writing and were less familiar with resources offered by ASC. Stakeholders in Session 1 and 2 shared frustrations that some organizational grants require the same amount of time and effort, regardless of the size of the grant.

Stakeholders identified several technical challenges they had experienced with the grant application process. One stakeholder in Session 1 shared an experience in which a grant application was not compatible with her iPad, her only platform for completing the application. Organizations in Session 2 debated the value of having a video requirement for some Cultural Vision grants. Some liked the ability to express themselves in a more personal way. Others said that they did not have the equipment needed to create a high-quality video, and felt that this would detract from their application.

Grant Review Process

Stakeholders in each session discussed the importance of choosing grant reviewers who are knowledgeable about the communities and neighborhoods where grant applicants seek to work. Stakeholders in each session debated the current practice of recruiting grant reviewers from outside of the community. Some thought that this lack of knowledge of the Mecklenburg cultural community helped to prevent bias, whereas others felt that the lack of familiarity made it difficult for grant reviewers to understand what programs the community needed. Stakeholders suggested that more in-person interaction with grant reviewers and inclusion of local reviewers would improve the grant review process.

Most Important Types of Funding

Though all types of funding were considered important, stakeholders most often prioritized and discussed the need for unrestricted operational funds. Stakeholders noted that these funds were needed to cover overhead costs (e.g. grant-writing, marketing), pay for needed technology upgrades, and pay for expenses not covered in project-specific grants.

Discussion

The Community Priorities Study engaged nearly 2,000 Mecklenburg residents in a survey to identify community funding priorities for the arts and culture sector. Residents' top priorities were support for nonprofits to sustain programming and community outreach, programs that celebrate diverse cultures and neighborhoods, and annual grade-level field trips. The public and cultural community showed near equal support for annual grade-level field trips. However, the public indicated higher support for programs that celebrate diversity, while the cultural community showed higher support for nonprofits to sustain programming. Likewise, there were statistically significant differences in priorities across race and ethnicity and some differences across geography.

These results indicate that while some commonalities exist, Mecklenburg County residents have diverse views about the types of arts and culture programming that they would like to see in their community. These diverse views are reflected in where participants live, their backgrounds, and their involvement within the cultural community.

Artists, creatives, and organizations were engaged in a series of focus groups and workshops to discuss the assets, needs, and priorities of the cultural community. Stakeholders indicated that ASC, their partnerships, and their networks were among their most important sources of support. Stakeholders identified several important needs, including funding, affordable space, and ability to quantify and communicate the value of the arts economy, the last of which stakeholders noted was a crucial for obtaining consistent funding.

Taken together, the current study demonstrates the wide range of priorities of arts and culture stakeholders in Mecklenburg County. By understanding how priorities differ by stakeholder group, these results can be used to make strategic and targeted funding decisions in the years to come.