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## Looking for Equity in Arts Financing

By [FELICIA R. LEE](#)

In Harlem, Marline A. Martin, the executive director of the Children's Art Carnival, figures that losing her financing from the city's Cultural Affairs Department means she will have half the number of students this fall in her school-day program for children whose schools don't offer art.

Downtown, near Stuyvesant Park, Diane Fraher Thornton, the director of American Indian Artists Inc., squeezes dollars from her budget for a project of readings by Indian playwrights.

Ms. Martin and Ms. Thornton are among the dozen or so leaders of a coalition of arts organizations in New York City called the Cultural Equity Group. In a proposal to city officials the group asked for \$15 million in the city budget that would go to so-called culturally specific organizations, serving blacks, Hispanics, Asian-Americans and American Indians. The money — to be used for things like programs and administrative support — would be separate from financing awarded by city agencies, like the Cultural Affairs Department.

That agency's grant panels do not use culturally specific criteria when awarding money. For fiscal year 2009, which began July 1, the panels awarded 862 program grants, a total of \$26.5 million. According to the department, organizations that said in their mission statements that they explicitly served "a community of color" accounted for 22 percent of the applicant pool and received 22 percent of the dollars.

But the Cultural Equity Group defines its members by the race and ethnicity of their leaders, staff, board members and service to "communities of color," among other criteria. The group also wants money to study financing patterns and to measure the impact of their organizations.

"The competition for funding does not take into account the issues of the communities we serve — the soaring high school dropout rate, the foster care kids, the people facing re-entry from prison," said Laurie A. Cumbo, another Cultural Equity Group leader. In 1999 she founded and is now the executive director of the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts, which uses the visual arts for education and also has exhibitions in its space in Brooklyn.

Councilman Domenic M. Recchia Jr. of Brooklyn, chairman of the cultural affairs committee, said he told the coalition there was no money for new initiatives in the \$59.1 billion city budget for the new fiscal year.

Still, the Cultural Equity Group's quest has reignited a lively debate in the arts world about just what cultural equity means.

Kate D. Levin, the cultural affairs commissioner, said that in her agency's experience a group's mission statement — as opposed to leaders, staff and board — most reliably captures what it does and who it serves.

“Our new funding process supports 25 percent more groups with significantly more dollars than in the past,” she said. “We’ve opened up a system that was previously unresponsive to need or demand, and we’re more equitable and transparent than ever before. Naturally anytime there’s change, there’s a debate.”

The process changed in fiscal year 2008. In the previous year cultural institutions not on city land competed for grants from a \$3.8 million pool from the department (with an additional \$20 million distributed through fixed allocations in the city’s budget and one-time items from City Council members).

In fiscal year 2008 arts groups competed for \$26 million from the department. More groups got more money than ever before.

Those grants are still too small for institutions that have been underfinanced for years, lack extensive donor bases or cannot meet some of the peer-review criteria for management and financial stability, Ms. Cumbo said. The Cultural Equity Group is asking city and state government officials and politicians to explore solutions for new cash infusions.

At a recent meeting group members spoke of the difficulty of luring minority board members from elite organizations, securing bank loans in struggling neighborhoods and encouraging poor people to donate money to support the arts. Even success can hurt these centers, as the artists they have helped start go to bigger, wealthier places. At times, group members said, they had to cut back on programming or hours of operation, and staff members often do without things like health insurance.

“It’s a class issue as much as anything else because most of the institutions in our communities don’t have access to wealth,” said Marta Moreno Vega, president of the Franklin H. Williams Caribbean Culture Center African Diaspora Institute, an arts and education center in MidtownManhattan.

Founded more than 30 years ago, the center, like other members of the Cultural Equity Group, has struggled to put together a patchwork of government, corporate and foundation support, all of which waxes and wanes.

The coalition’s leadership includes representatives of the Association of Hispanic Arts, the Bronx Council on the Arts and the Harlem Arts Alliance, among others. The groups the coalition represents range in age and budget size, but all are struggling in an era when even elite organizations, like [Lincoln Center](#) and the [American Museum of Natural History](#), face city cutbacks in their operating budgets.

Members of the Cultural Equity Group had varying success with the Cultural Affairs Department financing process this year. Some did better (Ms. Cumbo saw her award go to \$33,000 from \$25,000), some worse (the Caribbean Cultural Center went to \$144,000 from \$156,000), and some, like the Children’s Art Carnival, received no money from the agency.

“I’m dismayed, confused and at a loss,” said Ms. Martin, whose 39-year-old organization provides art programs for people 4 to 21. Her school-day workshops, she said, would probably serve half as many of the more than 860 students they reached last year.

In the last couple of years the Children’s Art Carnival has received \$59,000 from the city each year, Ms. Martin said. Losing that money won’t shut its doors, she said, but it makes her group look less attractive to other

financers.

[Michael M. Kaiser](#), the president of the [John F. Kennedy Center](#) for the Performing Arts in Washington, said arts groups identified as nonminority generally received about 60 percent of their budgets from individual donors, compared to 10 percent for those that are culturally specific. Government and foundation support dries up in tough times, Mr. Kaiser said, so turning to the city is not as useful a long-term strategy as gaining development expertise.

“I am talking about good marketing skills, getting people excited about your work, a disciplined fund-raising,” he said.

Others insist that even the definition of a culturally specific organization is up for grabs: should a group be judged by its mission to serve a particular community, by the race or ethnicity of its leadership or by the identity of the audience it draws?

“What is a level playing field?” asked Patricia Cruz, executive director of Harlem Stage. “All arts organizations are in trouble now. This issue needs to be quantified: How many organizations run by or serving people of color are out there and how many have perished? We feel it in terms of the organizations that are struggling so intensely, but if a fact-based analysis finds what people know intuitively, then you can address this.”

Ms. Cruz said she thought the Cultural Affairs Department had done a good job in reaching out to all kinds of groups and making its financing process more transparent.

“The Cultural Equity Group is doing exactly what we did 30 years ago,” said Mary Schmidt Campbell, chairwoman of the New York State Council on the Arts. Ms. Campbell was the executive director of the [Studio Museum in Harlem](#) from 1977 to 1987 and served as the New York City cultural affairs commissioner from 1987 to 1991. She recalled how demands for more diversity led to city governments, foundations and corporations providing dollars and technical assistance for nonwhite cultural organizations.

That support helped establish places like the Studio Museum in Harlem and El Museo del Barrio, now two examples of elite, robust institutions, Ms. Campbell said.

With a map of what groups are out there and how they are faring, struggling organizations could then benefit with a more creative approach to financing, she said.

For now, the clock is ticking in places like Brownsville, East New York and Crown Heights in Brooklyn, Ms. Cumbo, of the African Diasporan arts museum, said.

“There’s no cultural outlet or release for the young people in these communities,” she said. “Get off the corners and go where? Get off the corners and do what?”

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