

The power and impact of the Artist INC program for the artists and communities in the Mid-America Arts Alliance region

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Since the partnership began in 2013, the support of M-AAA has not only sustained the program, but allowed it to expand and innovate. Over the past year alone, Artist INC has reached more than 800 artists in the region with the Artist INC Live seminar, What Works workshops, and our brand-new Artist INC Express, designed for communities outside major metropolitan centers. We have empowered these artists to strengthen their artistic practice, grow their arts businesses, and creatively engage with the communities where they reside. Throughout the year, as the applications roll in for the Artist INC core seminar in communities across the region (Kansas City, Omaha, Lawrence, Springdale, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, Argenta, Austin, and Houston) we have the opportunity to see the spectacular talent and vision of the individual artists working in this region. They are as diverse as their communities are, and they represent every demographic, every discipline and work in every medium.

Despite their diversity, they all have the same thing in common. They need help. They work in isolation. They are largely unsupported by their local arts institutions. There is a dearth of grant opportunities for artist projects. They can't get bank loans for their arts business. They compete in an all-or-nothing marketplace. And they carry a lot of student loan debt. They are entrepreneurial, but they operate as solopreneurs—wearing all the hats for their arts business—accountant, marketer, grant writer, technologist, fabricator, web designer, social media manager, administrative assistant. They juggle their art practices along with 9-5 jobs, academic positions, families, aging parents, and health issues. They are highly educated, many receiving art training at some of the best art schools and conservatories. But in those institutions, they were taught how to make their *art* work. They were not taught to make their *careers* work.

And the truth is – if they can't make their careers work, many give up on making the art work. They are the tree in the arts forest, when they fall no one notices, or seems to care.

So, we help them make it work. Artist INC programming provides artists with tailored small business development training, tools, resources and information about opportunities for professional development and new business for their work. In longitudinal survey data, we know that Artist INC Fellows do increase their ability to have financially sustainable careers. And we have a trove of anecdotal evidence that we have changed their lives for the better.

But that's just the beginning. I want to focus another key goal of the program: building a strong, supportive community of artists. Based on longitudinal data, from 1, 2, and 5-years post-seminar, participants increase their quantity of relationships with local artists of both the same and different disciplines. Beyond the increase in quantity of relationships, these artists also significantly increase their frequency of seeking support/advice/information from peers between intake to 5 years post-seminar. The impact of peer networking also goes beyond the actual program participants. When asked on 60-month longitudinal surveys "Have you shared information you learned in Artist INC with artists who have not yet participated in the seminar?" 100% of alumni responded, "Yes." So, for every 25 artists that go through the program, we estimate another 50 artists in the community who receive benefits as well. Since we have been on the ground in Kansas City since 2009, we know from intake data on new participants that the community of artists here now enter the program with a much higher skill level when it comes to business practices than the cohorts in the early years of the program.

By using a train the trainer model, and bringing peer facilitators and host organization administrators to Kansas City twice a year, we have now regionalized the multiplier effect. As the program began to expand, we started with six Kansas City artist facilitators who have gone on to train more than 60 peer facilitators throughout the region. Not only are we able to rapidly replicate the program, but we empower a core group of artists and administrators to activate the community of artists in their cities. These peer facilitators are established, successful artists in their respective

communities and have become the trunk of the tree of Artist INC-trained artists throughout the region who share resources, support and collaborate with one another, frequently connecting across disciplines.

In addition to the peer facilitators, the organizations who host Artist INC establish a connection to their local artists in a way other institutions in their communities cannot. They form a new hub of support for artists and Artist INC strengthens their ability to serve their artists and encourages innovation around artist-centric programming.

Artist INC is a research-based, data-driven program. That is one of its strengths. We have impressive amounts of data that confirm the effectiveness of the program on the quantitative aspects an artist's career. We have an equally impressive amount of qualitative information in the form of comments about the program that artists include in their surveys. Recently, we had one artist remark that she loved Artist INC so much, she wanted to marry it. And this is a recent social media post from an Artist INC Fellow in Arkansas: "In the last few weeks I was honored to witness accounts of people that have created and re-created themselves through the power of art. They are amazing individuals, and an intense force fueling our Northwest Arkansas arts community. This experience renovated my soul, expanded my views, and brought encouragement and tools to continue living a creative life. Thank you to my colleagues and friends at #ArtistIncSpringdale, I'm beyond inspired by you!"

We receive some of the most powerful feedback from the peer facilitators who attend training at the M-AAA offices in Kansas City. From Philip Rogers, a photographer and curator from Austin, Texas:

"Artist INC is a gift. A celebration of the participating cities and her artists. It is certainly a game changer for those who participate with passion. Being a fellow, and now going forward as a facilitator, has changed my life in many ways. I am better prepared and inspired going forward with artistic goals, involvement in community and living a more complete, happy life. Thank you and Artist INC for this valuable addition to my world."

And from Susan Knight, a visual artist in Omaha, NE:

“The training experience positively affected me as an artist on many levels. Your attention to the details of color coded lanyards, work boxes filled with little necessities and frequent breaks, modeled a nurturing philosophy that clearly conveyed how much you care about our success. If I had not experienced it I would not have believed how good it felt to be treated that way. In turn I pledge to use all my strengths for a positive outcome at Artist INC Omaha.”

And as a conclusion: From Dave Lowenstein, visual artist in Lawrence, KS:

“Thank you so much for inviting me to be a part of such an important and powerful initiative. It is undoubtedly a great service to artists as a set of professional development tools, but also as a simple and radical recognition of individual artists as the crucible for innovation and shapers of our stories.”

To you, the governing board of M-AAA, to the M-AAA staff under the leadership of Todd Stein, I want to express my deepest thanks for your supportive embrace of Artist INC. Through that support, it is abundantly clear that you recognize the primacy of the individual artists. You recognize that more art for more people is not possible without thriving artists. They are, indeed, “the crucible of innovation, the shaper of our stories,” and the necessary fuel for vibrant, creative communities.