



# Agents of Change

## Young Adult Advisory Councils at Arts and Culture Nonprofits

09/2023

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## Young Adult Advisory Councils at Arts and Culture Nonprofits

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# Introduction

With each new American generation, racial and cultural diversity increases. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are not only practical considerations for reaching these generations, but they are also critical values for today's arts and culture nonprofits. These values can drive innovative growth, create a positive work environment, and build audience connections while encouraging varied perspectives. Arts and culture was one of the first industries impacted by the pandemic in 2020 with immediate closures and significant revenue losses. As of 2023, visitorship, ticket sales, and participation in programming have not returned to pre-pandemic levels. At the same time, the movement for racial justice that emerged in 2020 has raised questions about whether and how arts and culture organizations and programming are responding to urgent community needs. In this study, we sought to understand the role of young adult advisory councils (YAACs) in helping arts and culture nonprofits address emerging issues, better understand the communities they serve, and achieve their missions, reflecting on how they can do this in a time of significant change and challenge for those organizations.



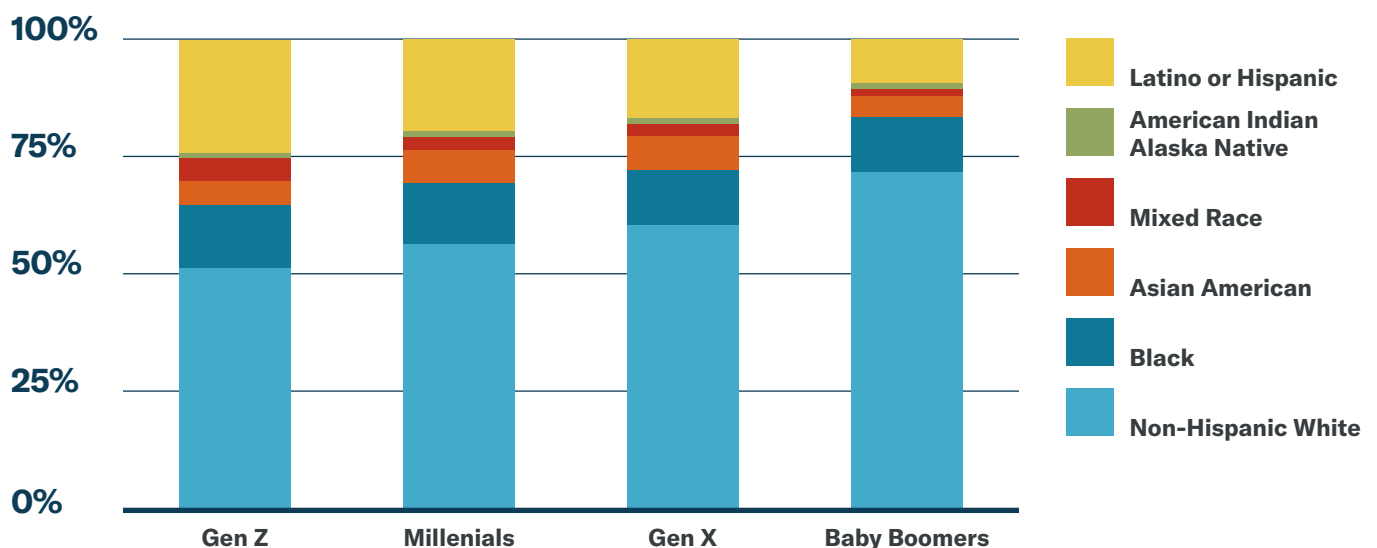


# Background and Context

## The Millennial generation and Generation Z in the United States

For this study, “young adults” are defined as individuals ages 16-35, an age range that includes young Millennials and all of Generation Z (Gen Z). Millennials are born between 1981 and 1996 and make up 22 percent of the current US population.<sup>1</sup> Gen Z are individuals born between 1997<sup>2</sup> and 2012<sup>3</sup> and make up a little more than 20 percent of the population.<sup>4</sup> According to Census Bureau projections, each generation younger in the US is more racially and ethnically diverse than any generation before.<sup>5</sup> While the US as a whole is nearly 60 percent White, Gen Z is 25 percent Latinx, as Figure 1 shows.<sup>6</sup>

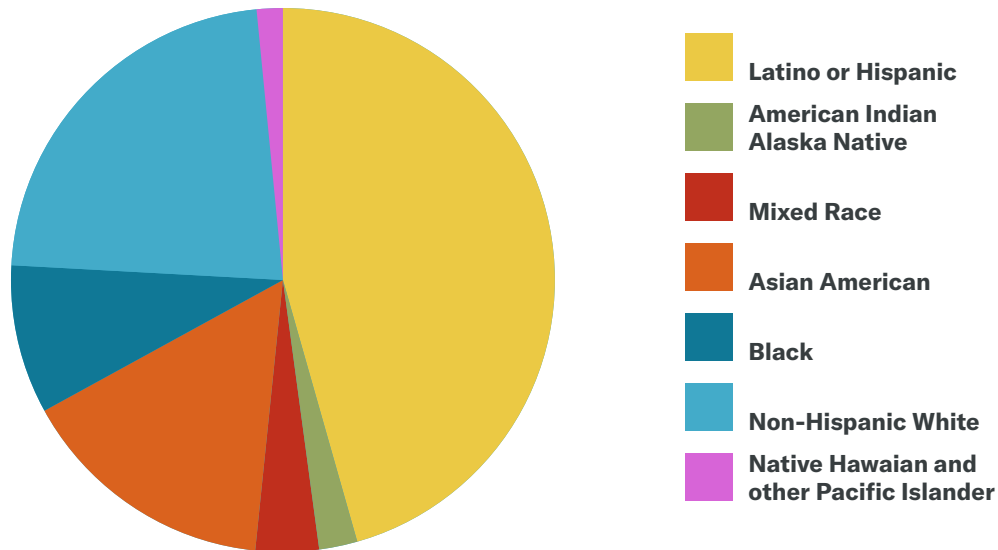
**Figure 1** US Racial Profiles by Generation



Source: William H. Frey analysis of Census Bureau population estimates released June 20, 2019<sup>7</sup>

The population of LA County is very different from the nation, as Figure 2 shows, where nearly half the population is Latinx.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 2** Race and Ethnic Makeup of LA County



Source: United States Census Bureau. “Quickfacts: Los Angeles County, California.”<sup>9</sup>

In addition to these changing racial and ethnic compositions, Millennials and Gen Z also have differing cultural behaviors related to things like marriage, philanthropy and giving, education, politics, and careers that have been informed by the social, technological, and economic circumstances they grew up in.<sup>10</sup> For Millennials, their behaviors have been influenced by the Great Recession and significant growth in student debt.<sup>11</sup> Gen Z behaviors are still forming and continue to be influenced by technology and the evolving social, political, and economic landscape, strongly affected by the social justice movement launched in 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup> For example, half of all individuals aged 18 to 23 reported that in 2020 they or someone in their household had taken a pay cut or lost their job, while only 40 percent of Millennials, 36 percent of Gen X, and 25 percent of Baby Boomers did.<sup>13</sup> It is also important to note that individuals who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic because

of underlying structural factors like occupational segregation and lower financial security.<sup>14, 15</sup> This follows on the 2008 recession, where research has shown that economic challenges made it harder for younger generations to achieve a positive trajectory towards financial security and personal wellbeing,<sup>16, 17</sup> forming households, and finding high-income jobs.<sup>18</sup>

These statistics show differences between the generations. In highlighting this data, the goal is not to stereotype young communities, but instead acknowledge that arts and culture organizations, including nonprofits, likely need to adapt to demographic, social, and economic changes as younger people enter and rise both in the workforce and as future visitors, attendees, members, donors, volunteers, and board members.

## **Why is young adult engagement important for arts and culture nonprofits?**

Data on the participation of young adults in arts and culture is mixed. The National Endowment for the Arts' (NEA) US Patterns of Arts Participation Study found that young adults were more likely to create, perform, and attend arts activities than older adults.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, in her analysis of findings from the National Awareness, Attitudes, and Usage Study, Colleen Dilenschneider of IMPACTS Experience, said that while young adults often visit cultural organizations they are “underserved” in comparison to their generation’s size by a factor of 24 percent. She notes that to be representative, 27.1 percent of visitation, attendance or enrollment etc. should be from Millennials, but her analysis found that millennial visitation was only 21.9 percent.<sup>20</sup> A UK survey found that one in five young adults do not attend or participate in activities related to arts and culture.<sup>21</sup> One explanation for these divergent findings is that the NEA defines arts participation as not



just arts attendance, but also includes activities like creative writing, photography, film production, graphic design, reading books, listening to music, and fair or festival attendance.<sup>22</sup> The California Survey of Arts and Cultural Participation also used an expanded definition of arts participation, finding that arts-learning, art-making, and the use of social media to discuss and learn about the arts, were more popular amongst young adults than older adults.<sup>23</sup>

With Gen Z and Millennials being some of the largest cohorts in human history, why do some studies show their participation in arts and culture nonprofits as lower than previous generations? Some organizations believe that there is a disconnect between program offerings and the needs of younger audiences. Others argue that young adults do not feel welcome,<sup>24, 25</sup> that programming has not been accessible to emerging audiences,<sup>26, 27</sup> that young people have other things to do,<sup>28</sup> and that a lack of diversity<sup>29</sup> has caused young adults to not feel reflected in programming or in the audience.<sup>30</sup> Nonprofits in general are being urged to evolve their thinking and open themselves to new and different approaches.<sup>31</sup>

While young adults are open to arts participation, many arts and culture organizations in particular still struggle to connect with younger audiences. The declining number of attendees overall to arts and cultural nonprofits relative to the growth of the population, suggests that these organizations have not sufficiently prioritized new and emerging audience engagement.<sup>32</sup> Research shows that there is no evidence that young adults are less interested in nonprofit organizations in general and thus have equal potential as audiences, visitors, and participants as older generations.<sup>33</sup>

Today, the nonprofit arts and culture industry does not mirror the diversity of the population who are their potential constituents.<sup>34, 35,</sup> <sup>36</sup> In LA County, a 2019 workforce demographics study found that 59 percent of the overall nonprofit arts and culture workforce is Non-Hispanic White. Moreover, supervisory and board of director positions

are less diverse than those working in non-supervisory positions, which are 49 percent Non-Hispanic White. This may be correlated with the fact that supervisory and board positions trend older, with 70 percent being over the age of 50 while the largest share of non-supervisory staff - 41 percent - are less than 35 years old.”<sup>37</sup>

The shifting demographics of rising generations are already having an impact on the ability of nonprofits in general to attract, retain, and engage constituents and donors.<sup>38</sup> Saratovsky and Feldmann argue that when nonprofits focus on maintaining their existing donor base rather than cultivating new constituents, they set themselves up to lose out on engaging Millennials, a generation estimated to have \$300 billion in spending power, and who will eventually receive \$41 trillion in wealth from older generations.<sup>39</sup>

If they are to evolve to meet the needs and desires of emerging audiences, nonprofits will need to stay current with young people’s complex changing nature related to habits of volunteering, technology, philanthropy, and nonprofit interactions.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, Millennials are the largest generation alive, with Gen Z following close behind. Combined, they are the most diverse generations in American history.<sup>41</sup> Rather than simply tweaking old programs or adding new ones, arts and culture nonprofits need to fundamentally change to reflect the constituents they serve and the audiences, participants, and donors they seek to reach. This will require a change in mindset, strategy, and culture.<sup>42</sup> Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) can drive innovative growth, a positive work environment, and audience connections while encouraging varied perspectives.<sup>43</sup>

## Young Adult Advisory Councils (YAACs)

One way some arts and culture nonprofits are engaging with Millennial and Gen Z audiences is through auxiliary councils of young adults. In this study we refer to these groups collectively as “Young

Adult Advisory Councils” or YAACs. We define a YAAC as a group of volunteers<sup>44</sup> ages 16 to 35 who support a nonprofit and advise them on matters related to the organization. YAACs do not usually include individuals that span the full 16 to 35 age range, but instead focus on a certain subset relative to their organizational mission or target demographics. These subsets usually fall under a younger or older category. Groups with younger members in their late teens usually meet onsite weekly or biweekly and are often paid. These teen groups most often participate in experiences focused on youth development, social emotional learning, and career preparation. Older groups meet less often, for example monthly, both onsite and offsite. Older youth participants are most commonly unpaid volunteers involved with fundraising, networking, career development, and other activities that train them to be future board members. These groups are utilized in various industries and go by many different titles including, but not limited to, “Advisory Board,” “Young Professionals,” “Junior Board,” “Leadership Council,” “Teen Council,” “Community Leadership Council,” and “Friends Of” groups. While “young adult” is often defined as starting at age 18, individuals ages 16 to 17 have been included in our YAAC category in order to give a larger picture of the current auxiliary group landscape across the US.

In both cases, YAACs are increasingly used by nonprofit organizations in general because they provide access to young talent with innovative ideas and connections to emerging donors, next generation leaders, and future board members.<sup>45</sup> Their function varies by organization and can include all of the following: shaping outreach strategies related to mission-driven programming and fundraising;<sup>46, 47</sup> representing previously underserved communities;<sup>48</sup> providing feedback on how to improve services;<sup>49</sup> increasing opportunities for diverse community members to get involved with a nonprofit; promoting long-term donor relations; and being ambassadors for a nonprofit.<sup>50</sup> YAACs also act as training grounds for



future board members<sup>51</sup> where young leaders can learn more about the organization and nonprofit management while developing other business skills. YAACs provide opportunities for networking<sup>52</sup> with like-minded peers while also allowing individuals to give back to their community.<sup>53</sup>

In general, YAACs and their members do not have formal legal responsibilities, governing power, or fiduciary duties like the nonprofit board of directors or trustees<sup>54, 55, 56, 57</sup> and thus cannot act with the same authority or be relied upon in a similar manner.

## YAAC benefits

There are many possible advantages to adopting and implementing YAACs. They can be broken down into benefits to the organization and benefits to the participant.

### Benefits to arts and culture nonprofits

Research on the benefits of YAACs to arts and culture nonprofits includes literature on building youth participation, Millennial engagement, and the inclusion of teens and older youth on boards or other committees. Benefits to the organization include:

- New energy, opinions, and insights regarding best practices and consumer communication, cultivation, and retention<sup>58</sup>
- Increased ability to have spontaneous events provided by more peer marketing on social media, visibility from word-of-mouth, and a deeper bond with constituents<sup>59</sup>
- Increased adaptability related to technology and trends<sup>60</sup>
- Credibility to organizations with missions related to youth capacity<sup>61</sup>
- Opportunities for staff and youth connections that could lead to them being stronger advocates in the community<sup>62</sup>

- A cultivated pipeline of donors and future leaders, as well as expanded resources and human capital<sup>63</sup>
- Constituent or community representation<sup>64</sup>
- A way for organizations to ‘try out’ volunteers or individuals for possible leadership roles<sup>65</sup>
- Improved programming and increased visibility in the community, both of which could lead to the attraction of funders.<sup>66</sup>

## YAAC participant benefits

Research on the benefits to individual YAAC participants can be broken up into benefits to teen participants separate from older youth participants. Research related to teens includes literature on youth engagement, youth development, and youth-led decision making.

These benefits include:

- As active participants, co-producing the design and delivery of programs and opportunities thus allowing young people to feel reflected within an organization<sup>67</sup>
- Effective long-term engagement as participants feel greater “ownership” over a nonprofit rather than just being seen as communities that require outreach<sup>68</sup>
- Development of skills related to leadership, communication, cooperation, teamwork, time management, strategic thinking, conflict resolution, decision-making,<sup>69,70</sup> fundraising, public speaking, and more<sup>71</sup>
- Enhanced self-esteem and social benefits like networking and increased access to employment opportunities<sup>72,73</sup>
- Real world experience with nonprofit governance<sup>74</sup>
- Empowerment,<sup>75,76</sup> and a sense of self-efficacy<sup>77</sup>
- Building confidence and cultivating life skills<sup>78</sup> like stress management, leadership, positivity, setting personal goals, and interacting with people of diverse backgrounds<sup>79</sup>

- A sense of purpose<sup>80</sup>
- Increased educational and programming opportunities within organizations<sup>81</sup>
- Opportunities for individuals to give back to their community.<sup>82</sup>

Benefits to older youth participants are less formally researched, leaving a large gap in the literature. An informal summary of claims YAACs have made includes

- Cross-generational mentoring<sup>83, 84</sup>
- Opportunities to give back and make a positive impact on the community<sup>85</sup>
- Engagement with other professionals with similar passions<sup>86</sup>
- Preparation for future board seats<sup>87</sup>
- Invitations to special events and discounted admission tickets<sup>88</sup>
- Development of skills related to nonprofit management, arts advocacy, event planning, and fundraising.<sup>89</sup>

## YAAC considerations and caveats

Although there are many benefits of YAACs, the literature also demonstrates potential challenges, some of them quite significant. Ensuring that a YAAC is designed to bring positive impacts to all members of a community is important throughout the lifespan of an organization. Having equitable representation of participants on a YAAC can help avoid misrepresentation of teen and older youth voices within an organization.<sup>90, 91</sup> It is also important to ensure that a nonprofit does not tokenize individuals within a YAAC, as one individual should not act as a representative for all people within a specific group.<sup>92</sup>

Additional considerations when creating a YAAC include choosing a title, understanding barriers, and mindfulness when working with youth. When choosing the name of a YAAC, some resources



recommend not using the term “board” in the title as it could cause confusion between the group and the nonprofit’s governing board.<sup>93</sup> <sup>94</sup> Using the term “junior” in the name of a YAAC group has the ability to miscommunicate the importance of the position, diminishing its value in the eyes of participants and translating to decreased efforts or participation.<sup>95</sup>

Also in the YAAC development process, a nonprofit should work to understand logistical, economic, and experiential barriers to entry participants may face.<sup>96</sup> These barriers can include, but are not limited to, the idea that arts are only for certain people, the atmosphere or actual meeting locations, language, and the cost of participation.<sup>97</sup> For younger participants, additional barriers apply and can include guardian permission, feelings of not being qualified, concerns over not being listened to,<sup>98</sup> a lack of empowerment and authority,<sup>99</sup> the location of the organization, the ability to drive, and conflicting schedules.<sup>100,101</sup> To combat these, nonprofits can utilize asset mapping, networks, and dialogue among current staff members.<sup>102</sup> Getting top-down and bottom-up buy-in from staff and leadership<sup>103</sup> can help nonprofit organizations commit the time and energy to getting results from a YAAC, and to making the experience meaningful and rewarding for participants.<sup>104</sup> Links to more information regarding YAAC development can be found in Appendix 1.

Working from this body of knowledge related to YAACs, this study sought to explore how they can help arts and culture nonprofits address emerging issues, better understand the communities they serve, and achieve their missions. In particular, we wanted to discover how they can do this in a time of significant change and challenge for those organizations.



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# Methods

To further understand the role of YAACs in arts and culture nonprofits, we conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals across the US who manage or oversee YAACs and with individuals participating in these programs. In total, 25 interviews were conducted with individuals from 11 YAACs. Half of the interviewees were YAAC managers and the other half were YAAC participants. Six of the groups were made up of teens, while five of the groups were centered around college-aged individuals and young adults over the age of 20.

Throughout this study, we use the word “participant” to refer to both teens or older youth participating in YAACs. We refer to teen participants as “teens” and college-aged individuals and individuals over the age of twenty as “older youth”. We use the word “manager” to refer to the individuals that oversee YAACs.

This study focused specifically on arts and culture organizations whose primary work is defined by one or more arts disciplines found in the National Standard for Arts Information Exchange Project (NISP) taxonomy.<sup>105</sup>

Organizations were selected using maximum variation sampling in order to get a wider, more inclusive range of perspectives of those who have managed or participated in a YAAC at an arts and culture nonprofit. Nonprofits with YAACs were coded according to a series of categories, based on data available on their websites:

- institution type
- geographic location
- size of nonprofit
- size of YAAC
- age range of YAAC members



- role of the YAAC within the organization
- costs/income associated with participating in the YAAC.

From this coded set of nonprofits, eleven were selected that represented a wide variation across these categories. The types of institutions chosen to be in this study were as follows:

<b>Type of Nonprofit</b>	<b>Number of Nonprofits</b>
<b>Art Museum</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Art Center</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Arts Council/Agency</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Performing Group/Music</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>School of the Arts</b>	<b>2</b>

The YAACs chosen can also be categorized by the age range of participants they served:

<b>Age Range of Participants</b>	<b>Number of Nonprofits</b>
<b>13-24</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>14-18</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>14-19</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>18-22</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>18-24</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>22-35</b>	<b>2</b>

We utilized LA County's Organizational Grant Program (OGP) Budget Categories to differentiate by size:<sup>106</sup>

<b>Annual Budget Revenue Category</b>	<b>Number of Nonprofits</b>
<b>\$200,000-\$999,999 (OGP 2)</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>\$1,000,000-\$14,999,999 (OGP 3)</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>\$15,000,000 and above (OGP 4)</b>	<b>5</b>

They were located in the following cities:

<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of Nonprofits</b>
<b>Boston, Massachusetts</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chicago, Illinois</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Detroit, Michigan</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>East Hampton, New York</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Indianapolis, Indiana</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Los Angeles, California</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Minneapolis, Minnesota</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>New Haven, Connecticut</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Phoenix, Arizona</b>	<b>1</b>

We reached out to YAAC managers at these organizations, or if no contact information was listed for the manager we reached out directly to the nonprofit. After contact was made via email, and a manager identified to interview, they were asked to recommend a YAAC member who was a notably engaged participant who could give

us insight into our research question to partake in this study. All managers interviewed were professionals who have been associated with the YAAC for more than one year and have a deeper understanding of the challenges and benefits of these groups. Teens and older youth who were interviewed were also required to have participated with the YAAC for at least one year. All individuals included in this study were asked to be over 18 years of age and gave verbal informed consent. One individual interviewed was under 18 years of age. To ensure the safety of the participant, we followed the nonprofit's protocol, which included a pre-interview check-in with the manager and the recording of the interview from their Zoom account. At the end of the interviews, managers and participants were asked open-ended demographic questions that allowed them to identify themselves in their own words:

## Managers

Questions	Responses
How old are you in decades?	20s - 5 30s - 6 50s - 2
How do you identify your race or ethnicity?	Asian American - 2 Biracial - 1 Latinx - 2 Nepali American, South Asian - 1 White - 6 White and Jewish - 1
How do you identify your gender?	Cis-Gay Man - 1 Female - 7 Male - 1 Non-Binary - 1 Non-Binary Trans - 1 She/Her - 2
Do you identify as someone with a disability?	No - 13

## Participants

Questions	Responses
How old are you in decades?	Teens - 8 20s - 1 30s - 3
How do you identify your race or ethnicity?	Black, African American - 1 Black or African American and Latino - 1 Caucasian - 1 Hispanic or Latino(a) - 3 Latina - 1 LatinX (Mexican American First Generation) - 1 Middle Eastern - 1 Puerto Rican - 1 White and Hispanic - 1
How do you identify your gender?	Female - 8 Gender Fluid - 1 Male - 1 Woman but also Non-Binary - 1 Declined to answer - 1
Do you identify as someone with a disability?	No - 12

The interviews were conducted via phone or Zoom and lasted 30-40 minutes. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed and coded for emergent themes.

## Statement of positionality

In this study, it is important to understand the authors' positionality and, therefore, our lens on the data. Natalie Elam is a research consultant at the Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture. She recently graduated from Claremont Graduate University with a Masters in Art Management. Prior to that, she attended Santa



Clara University, where she received a BA and BS in Studio Art and Anthropology. Natalie offers the findings of this study as only one possible interpretation of the experience of participants of YAACs based on her standpoint as a White woman who grew up in the Bay Area. She believes that accessibility and diversity are vital for every organization and hopes to show how YAACs can be one way that arts and culture organizations can adapt to a changing world. Bronwyn Mauldin is a cis-gender White lesbian who grew up in the Southeastern US and has lived on the West Coast since the early 1990s. In her career as a researcher, she has evaluated farmworker programs, studied employment conditions for truck drivers, analyzed apprenticeship opportunities in healthcare, researched villager organizing in rural northeast Thailand, and over the past ten years has conducted and overseen a wide range of studies related to the arts, artists, arts nonprofits, and arts education. She has a Master's in Public Administration. She acknowledges both the strengths and limitations of the methods used here, and sees this study as one contribution to a much larger conversation around equity and inclusion in the arts that should expand to incorporate many more voices.

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# Findings

YAACs had a positive impact on their institutions but there were limitations, some imposed by the organization and others being typical constraints of working with young adults. They also brought a form of diversity to their nonprofits ranging from the sharing of teen or older youth perspectives or by helping to grow audience demographics. There was a general consensus among all interviewees that these groups had the capacity to do more within an organization, but some were concerned about what tasks were reasonable to ask of youth without proper compensation and support.

Across the 25 interviews, five themes emerged:

- 1 Participants are partners, but with limitations
- 2 Diversity, equity, and inclusion
- 3 YAACs can demonstrate career futures in the creative economy
- 4 YAACs and their various learning models
- 5 Creating a space for youth to be comfortable

For a majority of YAACs, participants were seen as programmatic collaborators and a resource to help institutions connect with other teens and older youth. They were also a part of making DEI more intrinsic by initiating inclusive practices within arts and culture nonprofits. Being associated with these organizations, participants had the opportunity to have firsthand experience with various careers. They were also able to gain new skills, taught to them through a combination of learning models, necessary for entering a collaborative society and workforce. Older youth were able to network, learn new career skills, and connect with others who share their same passions. Space, both physical and emotional or

psychological, were important for making teen participants feel safe, comfortable, and valued. Older youth felt a sense of value when they were able to make the organization's physical and emotional or psychological space more accessible for others.

The following sections explore these five themes in more detail.

## Theme 1: Participants are partners, but with limitations

One key aspect of success for YAACs was to treat participants as **equal partners**, though “partnership” meant different things in practice across these organizations. Both teens and older youth brought **unique strengths** to the organization that staff, board directors, and adult volunteers did not. They could serve as **thought partners** on those issues with which they had personal experience. At the same time, several respondents described **limitations**, areas where participants could not be asked to function as full partners.

Partnership was generally seen as the equal treatment of all parties in the construction and shaping of a YAAC and its programming. For example, when talking about the successes of his group, one manager said,

*“[Success is] knowing that it feels like we are building with them rather than building a program for them. I know it’s successful when I am able to hear from them specifically, and the big things they said were missing. To me that is so successful because they are able to identify an opportunity, identify a lack of something based on a learning they had while on the young adult council and that they felt comfortable with me to have that direct conversation and brainstorm together.”*



A participant from the same YAAC, felt similar sentiments when she worked with a teaching artist on an article for a study guide.

*“We wrote an article about grief and about dealing with trauma, specifically in Hispanic/Latino families for students who are dealing with something similar. I feel like when we were writing that piece, it was a partnership and less of a mentorship where he was teaching me. I felt like we were able to work together and contribute equally. Which is another thing that I really liked. That we are not looked down on for being younger, for being teenagers. Our feelings are valid, and they listen. We’re treated as equals.”*

The importance of frame of mind when working with youth was also discussed when talking about partnership and equality. Some individuals said that instead of viewing someone as just a young person who can only do certain things, managers should give them tangible opportunities to succeed. A few managers credit this mentality for helping establish teen culture within their organization and for strengthening their institutional community. Participants also found this ethos to contribute to success. One participant talked about how their YAAC was given responsibility to hire a new Program Coordinator. Since this new member of the team would be working directly with the YAAC, this participant was given the opportunity to run the interview and hiring process. Participants of this YAAC appreciated that their opinions were valued and that they were able to impact decisions that affected them.

Other managers saw partnership as working with older youth as “thought partners” within their institutions. Treating them as thought partners meant seeing them as more than a resource and instead as valued employees who would eventually make leadership more diverse within their industry. In one case, the YAAC planned and led a conference of leaders, funders, and practitioners from across the country to discuss what is needed for racial equity in the arts. Giving

participants the opportunity to present at conferences, one manager said, allows them to “speak truth to power and be heard.” She also said that while there are advantages that come with partnering with both teens and older youth, it is important to be cognizant of how these efforts require a lot of time, work, and energy that can often feel overwhelming. As a result, managers should be thoughtful of workloads, compensate participants, and encourage mental and physical wellness.

In addition to time and energy constraints, some managers and participants discussed limitations stemming from the institution hosting the YAAC. One manager said that while participants might be interested in the YAAC’s budget, staff oversee it and retain control of economic decisions. From her perspective, there are only a few projects appropriate for participants to manage. Another limitation discussed by managers and participants was the participating youths’ lack of institutional knowledge. They said that it is important to find the right balance between giving youth agency to do things and throwing them into a situation without adequate information and direction. At the very beginning, managers should give participants clear parameters for what is possible for their YAAC to do and what is not, and what they can have an impact on. Not providing guidance can lead to many things, including mission drift. In one case, when working on a social media project for the orchestra, one participant learned that many of the suggestions their YAAC made were outside of the organization’s control or resources. For example, bringing in a modern pop star to perform would not only exceed the organization’s budget but would also contradict their mission.

## Theme 2: Diversity, equity, and inclusion

While a couple organizations created their YAAC to meet DEI goals, most were not part of specific institutional efforts. Within the groups, DEI was a primary focus point for a few YAACs, while the rest touched upon it through their work or, in their opinion, through the experiences and viewpoints that their diverse participants brought to the table. Both managers and participants of all ages talked about both **top down** and **bottom up** approaches of how DEI was incorporated into the YAAC, all agreeing that it was important and recognized that there was more that they could be doing. One manager said that DEI efforts should not be stand-alone **initiatives**, but should instead be **ingrained** within the fabric of the groups and be a given within organizations. When DEI is called out as an initiative, the message often becomes diluted and contrived. At that point it can be led by people that have little experience with DEI versus individuals to whom it is second nature.

Top-down DEI approaches were those led by an organization or manager and designed to flow through to YAAC participants. These practices included, but were not limited to, having set organizational DEI policies, conducting trainings, creating space for difficult discussions, inviting participants to institutional Board meetings, and providing resources to support success. In one example, a manager spoke to the YAAC about the importance of recognizing access, bias, and power dynamics in the grant making process. In another case, a manager brought in casting directors to talk about bodies in the theater and provided training related to anti-racism and anti-oppression. As a predominantly white institution, they thought it was important to hold space within their YAAC for conversations around difficult topics such as white privilege.

Bottom-up DEI efforts began with YAAC participants, including instances where participants created or encouraged programmatic adjustments or institutional changes. One participant recommended to her YAAC manager that they should advertise their programs through bilingual pamphlets at delis and laundromats, or make an announcement after church on Sundays. She also suggested placing a person of color on the front of their poster so that people in the area would see a friendly, welcoming face. Following implementation of these ideas, their next festival had over 400 attendees, a large increase from prior events. Another participant exemplified bottom-up DEI practices when they saw that the bathrooms were not inclusive:

*“We’re going through a renovation and someone asked about the bathrooms. They said, “Will there be a non-gender bathroom? My friend came the other day, and they did not feel comfortable using the bathroom in this building.” So, I brought it to our next meeting, I said, here’s a question from our [YAAC], how are we addressing this? At that point we weren’t. We are now. And I think that having their presence in this building makes those DEI questions more strongly asked, because they are of a generation where that is in their bones.”*

Others said that their DEI approach was less explicit and instead based on personal experiences or that it was indirectly woven into projects, including a social justice-oriented concert that celebrated individuals who broke cultural barriers; or a museum show that educated the community about how slavery took place in their town. Some said that their inclusivity comes from being in a Latino area, working with “black and brown youth living in the world,” and choosing YAAC members that mirror their student population, which is 99% non-White students. While methods varied, managers highlighted the importance of being reflective and creating space



for thoughtful conversations. One example of this is an organization questioning whether being exclusive can be inclusive. She asked:

*“If we were to have an event that was only for a minority group and we excluded everybody else, does that actually support or contradict our original intention of creating inclusive events? We’ve grappled with that and they really worked through what that means, which was a really beautiful thing to witness. I don’t think that they’re having those conversations anywhere else.”*

### **Theme 3: YAACs can demonstrate career futures in the creative economy**

Many managers observed that YAACs helped show young adults and their families that there are **productive professional careers** in the arts. Generally, they did this through showing **examples of jobs** within the creative sector, providing **networking** opportunities, and by **paying youth participants**. A few teen and older youth participants said that these experiences helped them decide what they wanted to do in the future and presented ways for them to stay involved with the arts even if their main job was in a different industry.

One way organizations showed participants viable careers in the creative economy was by providing exposure to the field and various jobs. Some managers brought in guest speakers at each meeting to talk about their experiences. This not only showed participants the skills that they would need but it also helped them develop connections to individuals in various fields, internal and external to their organizations. Participants enjoyed coming in every week and spending multiple hours,

*“Walking around a certain exhibit or a gallery, meeting new people and seeing what they do. Seeing the different types of*

*opportunities that come to us as team members. You just see how loving they are to the job and to the museum.”*

One participant said that these opportunities helped them to discover their passion for creative advertising and marketing communications and, as a result, plans to get a degree where she can help bring in more Latino artists to the museum and nonprofit space. Another said that working with the YAAC inspired her to want to work in the social justice and advocacy space, and she will now minor in social work.

Another way YAACs helped show youth participants and their families that careers in the arts were valuable was through compensation. A few managers said that paying people was important because they wanted participants to see that making art and being creative was an important skill set that would not hinder them or be a barrier to helping out, school, or buying food. Others said that when a program was paid, it helped people see it as a real job with responsibilities that they were accountable to. When they were compensated, participants said that it motivated them, made their role on a YAAC a priority, and helped them feel like their work was worthwhile and valued.

An older youth and managers said that working with the YAAC helped them, or someone in the group, stay involved with the arts, even if it was not their main career. While many people grow up loving music, playing in bands, or singing in a choir, most will not be professionals but still want to be involved. One manager said,

*“I never even heard of arts administration until I was hired here. So, I kind of took it as my job to tell everybody about this. Because you can be a clarinet player up until you know, 12th grade, and then you don’t want to play clarinet anymore. But you’re really good at marketing, like great, you can be a marketing person for a symphony orchestra. Did you know you could do*

*that? It's a great way for people who have a passion for the arts to still be involved in it somehow."*

## Theme 4: YAACs and their various learning models

Two interrelated key elements for successful YAACs were **omni-directional** and **social-emotional learning**. Omni-directional learning was talked about as teaching and learning that can be done in all directions and by all individuals. This is different from the traditional teacher/manager to student/participant model in that it instead encourages everyone to learn from one another. Social-emotional learning was described as an educational method that fosters self-awareness and interpersonal skills to help people enter a collaborative workforce. While managers and participants of all ages equally discussed the value of omni-directional learning, social-emotional learning was exclusively mentioned by youth participants and their YAAC managers.

Omni-directional learning was generally implemented through openness, an intentional lack of teaching expectations, and by creating space where learning could happen. One example of omni-directional learning was a YAAC's participant-led professional development seminar for arts educators. The manager described it as a:

*"really cool way for arts educators to learn about the needs of the diverse communities. Through that process, we learned a ton, including that young people really want to be more engaged in organizations and initiatives that center their voice. They want to know how they can get involved in how arts education policy is shaped."*

Another example of omni-directional learning was a manager's focus on transparency and recognition of personal errors and faults. She

encouraged participants to call her out because, in her opinion, it meant that growth was taking place, bringing them a step closer to innovation and systemic change. Some participants expressed approval of this learning style. Since they are the future of arts and culture organizations, they said, their interests and passions are a valuable part of an organizational conversation.

Social-emotional learning was also discussed among YAAC managers. One example of how these skills were promoted was through workshops for youth YAAC members that focused on communication styles and the various lenses and cognitive biases that people can bring into a conversation. Another used Liz Lerman's Critical Response Process, a constructive dialogue focused on methods of receiving and giving feedback. One followed a Creative Youth Development model, a skill building practice based in the arts, sciences, and humanities that sees youth as partners and agents of their own development. Another worked with Dr. Yolanda Majors from the Hurston Institute for Learning and Development to focus their program on growing critical thinking skills.

One manager described this work as building awareness of their own thought-processes and being able to hold two differing perspectives at once. Her organization measured social-emotional growth through self-reflective surveys and through the number of "I" statements participants used to describe what they were thinking or feeling. One participant enjoyed this aspect of the YAAC because, in her words,

*"not only did we learn how to communicate with each other during difficult topics and discussions that we had about art, or about political views or our values, but we also learned how to talk about these things within our own minds."*



## Theme 5: Creating a space for youth to be comfortable.

A majority of both managers and participants described the importance of space. For some this meant a **physical** location where participants could come, take up room, and feel comfortable within the walls of their nonprofit. For others it was an **emotional and psychological** space where they felt safe to speak their minds and try new things. Managers talked about both types of space equally, while youth participants more often discussed aspects of emotional and psychological space. Increased comfort in either type of space led to increased attendance from participants and other youth at institutional programming. It is important to note that, in general, the YAACs with older participants did not discuss physical space as a personal factor. This may be because they are not on site as often because they meet less than YAACs with youth members. Older youth participants did mention that they felt gratification when they were able to help others, especially those younger than them, feel comfortable within their organization.

A majority of managers and youth participants who described physical space defined it as a building, a room, and its contents. They said that being comfortable in the physical space of the organization was important because when young people or people new to creative industries are on location, they often feel required to act a certain way and be quiet or listen to authority figures. They rarely arrive for the first time feeling ownership. Without that feeling, YAAC participants can feel discouraged from returning or may not want to share this experience with others from their community. To create a location where participants felt comfortable, one manager decided to include them in the process of “activating their space.” During construction of their building they created youth committees

to recommend best uses of the space and brainstorm how it could be utilized for youth programming. After the building was complete, participants led workshops for other teens, inviting them to come and get to know their new building. As one participant put it, when organizations create a physical location for youth, it can be a success for many different types of stakeholders. Similarly, one manager said, *“It makes me really happy when the teens are spread out on our couch just charging their phones and having lively discussions. It can really show other patrons that museums are spaces to do that, that [visitors] can take up space in them. I also think that they have a lot of benefit to staff and that it’s a really immediate way for people to feel the impact of a museum.”*

A few participants and managers spoke about virtual spaces, including websites, social media, and online meetings. The manager of one teen YAAC said that moving their meetings online due to the pandemic allowed more members to join in, especially those who lived farther from the institution. The manager of a YAAC for older youth noted that when meetings moved online, some of their participants found themselves in meetings with funders from across the US. This was a unique opportunity for them to see how powerful people responded to the crisis, both in moments of strength and of vulnerability.

A majority of managers and participants who talked about emotional and psychological space described it as an environment where individuals are able to express their feelings and cultivate connections, to try new things and grow personally. The notion of emotional and psychological space is important for arts and culture nonprofits that are working with teens and older youth because both are in a vulnerable stage of life experiencing events that have wide ranging social, emotional, and physical impacts. Some managers and participants have created a safe emotional and

psychological environment by, for example, making sure everyone has been introduced to each other; providing food that meets their dietary needs, including vegan, vegetarian, halal, and other options; establishing regular check-ins; creating systems to elevate feedback into change; ensuring leadership opportunities for youth of color; and engaging in efforts to make participants feel valued. For one manager, focusing on both emotional and physical space allowed youth participants to engage in self-creation and use art and creativity as a vehicle for connection. She credited this mentality for the development of a long-term intimate and passionate relationship with their organization and with their community. For one participant, the support he received from their YAAC allowed them to feel powerful, saying,

*“It is a space that makes adults nervous, and that is a good thing. Me and my friends have talked about how [our YAAC] is a space of empowerment, but we don’t like the idea just because we think that the word empowerment implies that a group of people doesn’t have that power to begin with, or doesn’t hold importance in society. Like [the opinions of] youth are looked at as not as valuable as the opinion of a straight White man. There’s all these different demographics of minorities that aren’t given the power to make decisions in organizations like this, and us being able to make that statement was really powerful.”*





WATER IS LIFE  
WOMEN & EARTH HAVE TO TOLEBRATE A LOT

I STAND WITH STANDING ROCK  
KEEP IT IN THE GROUND

I STAND WITH STANDING ROCK

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# Recommendations

Based on what we have learned through this study, we offer the following recommendations for different stakeholders in the field:

## Organizations with YAACs

- 1 Be specific and explicit about whether a YAAC is intended to further institutional DEI goals.** Arts and culture nonprofits should not simply settle with having a diverse YAAC. Rather, they should be intentional about how these groups can play a role ingraining DEI into the fabric of the organization through specific policies and practices. This work should not fall upon or burden participants, but should instead be a collaborative effort with youth, initiated by the nonprofit. Once these standards are established, they can be used to help keep an organization accountable to its goals and authentic in its actions.
- 2 Articulate the purpose of the YAAC clearly.** YAACs can have different functions and purposes depending on the needs of the organization. For example, is it primarily intended to be a fundraising body, or is its main purpose to develop future leaders? Will the YAAC have input into programming or not? Articulating its purpose clearly will help managers do a better job of managing and will help potential participants know whether this opportunity is right for them.
- 3 Cultivate a line of communication between the YAAC and its institution.** YAACs can have a greater impact when they are able to communicate openly and coordinate with their arts and culture nonprofit. Not only does this allow both parties to work together



better, but it also provides opportunities for omni-directional learning that can lead to the production of relevant programming and the increase of both teen and older youth audiences.

- 4 Pay YAAC participants.** Providing payment increases accessibility, thus increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion. Compensation also shows participants that there are productive careers in the creative industries, helps keep both sides accountable to each other, and makes individuals feel valued and respected within an organization. Arts and culture funders should consider creating specific programs to fund YAACs, so that they are properly and continuously resourced to support their work.

## Local arts agencies and arts grantmakers

- 1 Support collaboration among local YAACs.** Participants are interested in learning and working with people and groups outside of their own institution. Provide opportunities for YAACs to do this by helping to build relationships between local organizations who have or are thinking about creating a YAAC.
- 2 Encourage young adult leadership.** Support YAACs that encourage participants to take a leading role in the creation and operation of the group. Joint management helps to make a more well-rounded experience for all and stimulates diverse perspectives within an organization.
- 3 Bring YAACs into the policy making process,** especially on issues for things that will affect them or their participants. From this study, we learned that young adults are interested in arts policy, but often are unsure about how to get involved. Policy makers could solve this issue by creating a partnership with a YAAC. Once established, it is important that they actually listen to participants and use their insights to create an impact.

- 4 **Look for ways to support DEI through YAACs.** Utilize grantmaking to support arts and culture nonprofits in the creation or management of YAACs anchored in DEI priorities and practices. Work with participating organizations to build a set of parameters that will help guide them and keep them accountable to specific standards. Ensure that the grant process is accessible and provide technical assistance to organizations that may not be as familiar with the experience.
- 5 **Provide consistent funding for YAACs.** This can help to ensure stronger and more meaningful integration of the YAAC into the larger organization. Providing funds to pay participants, as noted above, can increase equity of opportunity for participants.

## Teens and older youth

- 1 **Explore a career in the arts and culture nonprofit field.** For many participants, being a part of a YAAC will be the first time that they will be involved with an arts and culture organization, the creative industries, or a nonprofit in general. With staff as a resource, they can view this experience as a way to see if they want to pursue a future career in this industry.
- 2 **Build your network.** Participation in a YAAC can be an opportunity to hone interpersonal communication skills while creating long-lasting professional relationships with other participants as well as adults.
- 3 **Gain leadership skills.** YAACs can also be a place to learn new leadership skills and test them out in a supportive setting.



An Artist for President  
The Ballerina in the Archives, He are the Artists  
THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES  
By Susanna Wiley Rubin  
Illustrated and Edited by Susanna Wiley Rubin

E! TV  
Cineco Video Museum



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# Conclusion

In this study, we sought to understand the role of YAACs in helping arts and culture nonprofits to achieve their missions, and to reflect on how they can do this in a time of significant change and challenge for those organizations. Five themes emerged that exemplify how these groups can have an impact on an institution. We have made recommendations that can help stakeholders across the nonprofit arts field create or strengthen their YAACs.

These findings reflect the experiences of a small number of arts professionals and a subset of teens and older youth. While the experiences, perspectives, and findings shared here provide important insights, there is much more to be learned beyond the scope of this study. We encourage future researchers to continue to explore the evolving relationship between YAACs and arts and culture nonprofits, paying special attention to how these groups can provide career and leadership opportunities as well as cultivate diversity, equity, and inclusion within an organization. We also encourage practitioners — both managers and participants — to share what they have learned. By studying these experiences, we can move arts and culture nonprofits to become a more equitable place for all.

(903) 6

Little Tokyo  
Design Week

g. Vols  
Practice





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# Appendix 1

## Sample YAAC guides

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# Appendix 2

## Interview protocol

### Informed Consent (all)

Let me begin by giving you a brief overview of this study and our proceedings today. As I mentioned in my email, I'm working with the LA County Department of Arts and Culture on a study of young adult advisory councils at arts and culture nonprofits in the US. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of how these groups can play a role in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in career and leadership opportunities and the production of more inclusive programming at arts and culture nonprofits.

For this study I am conducting interviews with individuals who manage or oversee young adult advisory councils and with individuals who participate in those same groups. For this interview I am using an interview protocol that is the same for all YAAC managers. The last topic we will cover in this interview will be about identifying a participant in your [YAAC name] that I can interview.

I will be taking notes, but in order to make sure I get everything right I'd like to record our interview. I will not share the recording with anyone else, and after this study is published, I will delete it. Is that okay?

*[If yes, turn on the recording device. If not, then don't.]*

Thank you. During this interview, if there are any questions that you do not want to answer, you do not have to. If you need to stop early, just let me know. You may leave anytime during this process.



Your personal information is confidential and will not be disclosed in the final publication or anywhere on the transcript.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin? Is there anything I need to clarify?

### **Manager Questions**

- From my research I understand that you work in [briefly describe their career/job]. Is there anything I've missed?
- Why did your organization create [YAAC name]?
- When, why and how did you become associated with [nonprofit +YAAC name]?
- How does your nonprofit organization utilize [YAAC name]?  
[Potential prompts: volunteers, program development, fundraising, audience outreach etc.]
- Does [YAAC name] have a give/get requirement? What are the pros and cons of having it [or not having it, if not]?
- How does your organization define the success of the group?
- How do you recruit new members for the [YAAC name]?
- What has been the greatest benefit to [nonprofit] of having the [YAAC name]?
- What has been the greatest benefit to participants in [YAAC name]?
- That you know of, has participation in this group led to career or leadership opportunities for any participants?
- Does this group support any diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at [organization name]? If so, how? Could you give me a specific example? [Potential prompts: program development, audience outreach, board outreach, staffing, etc.]
- Could you please give me a brief overview of the demographic makeup of [YAAC name]?
- From your perspective, what are the limitations of your young adult advisory council?

- How has [YAAC name] evolved over the last year and a half as a result of COVID?
- Do you have a program evaluation or supporting documents for your young adult advisory council that you could share with me?

### **Now I have a few demographic questions to ask:**

- How old are you in decades? Are you in your 10s, 20s, 30s, etc.?
- How do you identify your race or ethnicity?
- How do you identify your gender?
- Do you identify as someone with a disability?

*[Turn off recording]*

Thank you so much. As I mentioned in my email, I am also looking to interview a [YAAC name] participant. Is there someone that you could recommend or put me in contact with that is engaged with this group but who could also give us insight into our research question?

### **Participant Questions**

- From my research I understand that your role in [YAAC name] is [briefly describe]. Is there anything I've missed? Do you have other roles in the organization?
- When and how did you find out about [nonprofit +YAAC name]?
- What made you want to join your young adult advisory council? What keeps you coming back?
- How does your nonprofit organization utilize [YAAC name]? [Potential prompts: volunteers, program development, fundraising, audience outreach, etc.]
- Does [YAAC name] have a give/get requirement? If so, what do you think are the pros and cons of having it [or not having it, if not]?
- What has been the greatest benefit to [nonprofit] of having the [YAAC name]?

- What has been the greatest benefit to participants in [YAAC name]?
- That you know of, has participation in this group led to career or leadership opportunities for any participants?
- Does this group support any diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives at [organization name]? If so, how? Could you give me a specific example? [Potential prompts: program development, audience outreach, board outreach, staffing, etc.]
- Could you please give me a brief overview of the demographic makeup of [YAAC name]?
- From your perspective, what are the limitations of your young adult advisory council?
- How has [YAAC name] evolved over the last year and a half as a result of COVID?

Now I have a few demographic questions to ask:

- How old are you in decades? Are you in your 20s, 30s, 40s, etc.?
- How do you identify your race or ethnicity?
- How do you identify your gender?
- Do you identify as someone with a disability?





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# Agents of Change

Young Adult Advisory Councils at Arts and Culture Nonprofits



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