

## GENERATIONAL RHYTHMS

An Ethnographic Study of the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan



### What is the issue?

Many smaller arts organizations are housed in larger academic, cultural, or community organizations that serve as fiscal sponsors or provide administrative, financial, and operational support. Though these arrangements often allow smaller organizations to access shared resources that contribute to capacity, they can sometimes create tensions as each entity evolves.

### What is the research context?

The Arab American National Museum (AANM) was founded post-9/11 in 2005 as a national museum celebrating Arab American history and culture. Since its inception, the museum has been housed in the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS), which was founded in 1971 and is known for its work in health care, poverty reduction, translation, immigration support, and other social services for new immigrant communities.

### What are the research findings?

The Arab American National Museum derives significant

### Research Approach

Through archival research that included quotes from videos and oral history testimonials, observations, and interviews with staff at both the parent and sponsored organizations, researcher Asif Majid explored the museum staff's perceptions of operating a museum within a larger, social services- and economic development-focused community service organization.

benefits from being housed within its mission-aligned fiscal sponsor, ACCESS, even as the study identifies challenges to the museum that are common to this structure. Chief among the advantages is that ACCESS manages the museum's administrative operations, creating a stable backbone of systems and expertise that allows AANM to focus staff resources on programming and curatorial work. This arrangement yields efficiency and continuity, though it can at times hamper the museum's ability to move rapidly and independently. Importantly, the fiscal relationship has also functioned

Brief based on a study by Asif Majid, Ph.D., University of Connecticut

as a financial safety net. When the museum has experienced budget shortfalls, ACCESS has been able to provide supplemental support, offering both resources and institutional shelter during lean periods.

In reflecting on the relationship between the Arab American National Museum and ACCESS, the researcher introduces an apt metaphor drawn from the first- and second-generation immigrant experience. ACCESS is described as operating in a first-generation mode, grounded in an ethos of establishment and assimilation—building infrastructure, credibility, and footholds within dominant systems. AANM, on the other hand, embodies a second-generation sensibility, marked by a more contemporary, critical engagement with the social and political issues of the day. Through this lens, the relationship is not one of misalignment but of generational rhythms, with two institutions rooted in shared cultural commitments, yet shaped by different historical moments and imperatives.

If this pattern holds at AANM, it could also be at play in other similarly situated arts organizations rooted in communities of color, such as those embedded in universities and other larger institutions. The founding mission of a parent and sponsored organization may branch from the same trunk rooted in advancing a cultural community; and though they remain connected, they may grow in different directions as contexts, audiences, and modes of expression evolve.

### Suggested Brief Citation

The Wallace Foundation (2026). *Generational Rhythms*. A research brief describing an ethnographic study of the Arab American National Museum in Dearborn, Michigan, by Asif Majid. The Wallace Foundation, New York. <https://doi.org/10.59656/A-AO5706.001>

## Why does this matter?

While there are pragmatic advantages for arts and culture organizations operating under a parent organization, complexities may arise over time. Funders and supporters may want to consider:

- Granting to support shared administrative capacity, even in cases where that support is housed in the sponsor organization.
- Viewing sponsor-provided infrastructure as an asset, rather than as overhead, and funding beyond visible programmatic work.
- Checking assumptions of mission drift when organizations engage more directly with contemporary social or political issues, which instead may be seen as mission evolution.
- Offering flexible, multi-year, or contingency funding that supports or builds “safety nets” that sustain organizations during periods of budget volatility.

The study this brief is based on was funded by The Wallace Foundation as part of its Advancing Well-Being in the Arts initiative. The initiative seeks to support and document the essential role that arts organizations rooted in communities of color play in the U.S. arts ecosystem. The original research and findings summarized in this brief are those of the researcher and do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.