



Introduction

The Southwest region of the United States includes states such as Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, Texas, and Utah. Common narratives about the Southwest tend to overlook the cultural richness of the region, as well as important contemporary demographic changes, such as an influx of Black and Asian residents into large metropolitan regions. Historical narratives of cultural absence consequently exacerbate funding disparities in the region, particularly for arts organizations rooted in communities of color that are chronically underfunded.

What is the research context?

The U.S. Southwest is home to the largest number of federally recognized tribal nations; additionally, in four states, racial and ethnic minority groups comprise a majority of the population. The region also contains some of the most biodiverse ecosystems and environments. Contrary to dominant narratives of desert and rural isolation, only 2.2 percent of the region's population lives in rural communities. Many people live in large western metropolitan regions like Phoenix, Salt Lake City, Denver, and Albuquerque. This study explores the funding

Research Approach

Researchers analyzed financial data from IRS 990 forms of nine arts and culture organizations rooted in communities of color. They also interviewed 13 arts administrators across six arts and culture organizations, three funding organizations, two municipal, state and regional arts agencies, and a national arts network. Informants were selected to ensure diverse representation by state and tribal nations, as well as the racial/ethnic communities represented or served.

landscape, networks, and community embeddedness of arts and culture organizations rooted in communities of color in the Southwest, with a focus on Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado, Nevada, Texas, and Utah.

What are the research findings?

The study found that the arts organizations examined

Research brief based on *BIPOC Arts and Culture Organizations: Funding Experiences in the U.S. Southwest*, written by Mako Fitts Ward, Christina You-sun Park, Amber Acosta, and Jay Taylor.

rely heavily on informal, community-based networks to sustain solidarity, mutual support, resource sharing, coalition building, and social accountability. Organizations within these networks serve as cultural hubs, especially within predominantly white spaces, for nurturing and expressing identity, amplifying underrepresented voices, and advocating for cultural and social policies. Local and regional networks provide connections to assets and resources that allow small organizations to navigate crises, reinforce resilience, connect with larger organizations, and work within local community systems.

Researchers also documented that smaller arts organizations face a range of challenges, including meeting funders' priorities, adhering to strict grant requirements, and lacking the capacity to handle the administrative burden of a complex grant process. Those interviewed also described needing to convey their mission creatively to apply for grants successfully, and the subsequent risk of "mission drift." This is especially the case when their dual mission of supporting artistic goals and a specific underserved community does not align with funders' priorities. For example, one Indigenous-led and -owned organization that serves tribal communities said it was easier to acquire funding for economic development than for the arts. Interviewees noted that organizations rooted in communities of color often must operate outside traditional nonprofit models to survive

financially. Many organizations are therefore fiscally sponsored, not incorporated, for-profit, freelance, sole proprietorships, commercial ventures, public civic initiatives, informal, or grassroots-driven efforts. Interviewees also spoke about the cultural barriers they face when navigating the arts funding landscape. Staff often have to code-switch while navigating predominantly white-led funding systems, which can distance them from their cultural work, leading to exhaustion and a sense of inauthenticity.

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Implications for Stakeholders

Future research that builds a nuanced, regional (rather than local, state, or national) understanding of the U.S. Southwest will be crucial for local arts organizations and funders. Future research can also help challenge dominant narratives and better reflect the complexity and richness of the region's evolving cultural and demographic landscape.

Funders and art advocates could better recognize and support the diverse organizational structures and cultural approaches to arts management. Funders also need to be willing to take on the burden of "cultural translation" to bridge gaps in communication and values between themselves and BIPOC arts organizations. This involves ensuring that funding criteria, reporting requirements, and artistic assessments honor how these organizations operate, while making funding systems more equitable through measures such as language access, common grant applications, and alternative ways to demonstrate artistic excellence.

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