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SSRC RESEARCH BRIEF

STAFFING ACTIVIST ARTS ORGANIZATIONS

An Ethnographic Study of the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center in San Antonio, Texas

What is the issue?

Cultural workers in organizations committed to social justice can experience conflict in the workplace, which often takes a toll on the organization as a whole. The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center is an arts-based advocacy organization engaged in activism in San Antonio, Texas. With social justice at the heart of the organization, internal and external conflict is a regular dimension of the work environment.

Research Approach

Between August and November 2023, the researcher reviewed archival materials and conducted participant observation and informal conversations with staff and community members. A community online survey and formal interviews with 27 members of the community, who were selected in agreement with Esperanza, were conducted from December 2023 through February 2024.

What is the research context?

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center was established in San Antonio in 1987 during a time of significant sociopolitical upheaval. Esperanza was founded to provide a space for social movements in support of civil rights, LGBTQ+ rights, and antiwar efforts to converge and bolster one another. The founders of Esperanza explicitly aimed to provide a platform for voices in these movements.

What are the research findings?

The Esperanza Peace and Justice Center has weathered many external challenges, including eviction from its original location, targeted attacks from local public officials, and hostility from oppositional community members. Internal conflict can arise in organizations already burdened by long hours and stretched resources. To illustrate the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, researcher siri hernández quotes author Dorcas Cheng-Tozun: “Across social movements, infighting has pretty much been the norm. Disagreements about anything from strategies and goals to responsibilities and leadership often turn into fiery, divisive arguments.”

Brief based on a study by siri gurudev hernández, Ph.D.

Oftentimes, these interactions can be perceived as personal; however, the study points to structural conditions that foster them. For example, at Esperanza, community advocacy work often requires weekend and evening work. Again quoting Cheng-Tozun, hernández notes: "We have come to equate dedication with self-sacrifice, and passion with working ourselves into dust." As the work day and work week lengthen, staff can lose a sense of separation of work and home life, leading to burnout. A lack of role clarity and decision-making authority can also emerge in this context. At Esperanza, the co-founders reported that when they were building the organization, "all did all." This dovetails with the reality that many community advocacy organizations are operating on stretched resources, and scarcity combined with significant ambitions driven by social purpose can overtax committed staff. Not only does it lead to burnout, but it can also spark tension and even hostility in the workplace. All of this fuels staff turnover, which contributes to resource depletion, creating a vicious cycle.

Despite inherent structural challenges that community-based activist organizations face, there are positive steps to support a more productive and stable work environment, hernández concludes. To recognize employee self-sacrifice, Esperanza's board passed guidelines to implement overtime pay. To respond to ongoing work-life balance challenges, the organization has instituted monthly mental health stipends. According to Director Graciela Sanchez, Esperanza's staff and volunteers, what she calls buena gente, continue to share work when necessary, and she notes that an immediate goal is to grow Esperanza's staff to alleviate some of the role drift and burden that leads to burnout.

Suggested Brief Citation

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See More

Esperanza & the Arts: Cultural Grounding. Full episode of a three-part documentary series on the Esperanza Peace and Justice Center. www.youtube.com/watch?v=RAXs6uDm0o8

Why does this matter?

This case study illuminates some unique structural challenges facing arts organizations focused on community-based advocacy. Funders interested in supporting similar organizations should consider:

- Funding general operating support that allows organizations to weather persistent threats, such as displacement, legal challenges, and security needs.
- Supporting staff care as mission-critical infrastructure and allowing grants to fund organizational participation in rest, repair, and wellness programs.
- Supporting organizational development, including HR systems, role clarification, and governance support, as well as facilitated conflict resolution and team-building.

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.

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