Wallace

SSRC RESEARCH BRIEF

THE COST OF LARGE SCALE COMMUNITY EVENTS

An Ethnographic Study of Self Help Graphics & Art

What is the issue?

Self Help Graphics & Art is a contemporary arts and cultural hub with deep roots in East Los Angeles and based in Boyle Heights. Like many nonprofit arts organizations rooted in communities of color, Self Help Graphics & Art faces pressure from funders to justify its value and impact. This is often measured by the number of participants and scale of events, which can place unrealistic demands on staff to run larger, more comprehensive programs without adequate funds. This study considers some challenges of executing large scale community programming.

Research Approach

The study's findings are based on participant observation at Self Help Graphics & Art from July 2023 to December 2024. Researcher J.V. Decemvirale attended weekly staff meetings, public programs, and interviewed staff, board members, and longtime stakeholders connected to the organization.

What is the research context?

Self Help Graphics & Art was founded in 1973 by the Italian American Franciscan nun, Sister Karen Boccalero, and Mexican artists Carlos Bueno and Antonio Ibañez. It arose out of the Chicano Movement for Mexican American empowerment in East Los Angeles. Home to one of Los Angeles' oldest collaborative print studios and longest running annual public celebrations of Day of the Dead, the organization continues to host extensive educational programming and exhibitions, including pop-up projects and exhibitions on museum and college campuses throughout Los Angeles County.

What are the research findings?

Self Help Graphics & Art runs small- and large-group events for artists and the broader Los Angeles community. As part of its Professional Printmaking Program, Self Help Graphics & Art conducts one or two atelier

Brief based on a study by J.V. Decemvirale, Ph.D., California State University, San Bernardino

projects annually, where five to seven artists create fine art limited-edition prints and monoprints. While smaller in scale, this program aims to provide hands-on support for artists' creativity, skill development, and careers. The research finds that when event scale shifts from hosting a smaller group of artists to large events like the Day of the Dead celebration, the relationships between staff and participants shifts from one built on cooperative engagement to one of service. That is, staff move from working as part of the community to working for the community, as they shoulder the coordination of large public events.

Staff acknowledge that the full scope of cultural maintenance work that goes into preparing and enacting large-scale community events often goes unseen. Moreover, large-scale events often require a temporary expansion of staff responsibilities that can veer into self sacrifice. While staff are vital to building community, the extra work involved can lead to burnout or disconnection from their role.

Many Self Help Graphics & Art staff come to know the organization through its community events and are from the beginning devoted to its mission. But burnout can take its toll, especially for younger staff who resist an organizational culture of sacrifice and overwork. This dynamic is prevalent among many community-focused arts organizations across the country.

Suggested Brief Citation

The Wallace Foundation (2026). *The Cost of Large Scale Community Events: A research brief describing a case study of Self Help Graphic & Art in Los Angeles, California, by J.V. Decemvirale*. The Wallace Foundation, New York. https://doi.org/10.59656/A-AO5139.001

Why does this matter?

Arts organizations often measure community engagement by tracking visitor numbers, event attendance, and participation. This case study shows that expanding community events to achieve greater numbers without increased funding can strain staff, undermining organizational health and sustainability. Funders could place greater emphasis on indicators based on qualitative data,such as participant interviews, community feedback, and staff reflections, to promote programming that better protects staff capacity and ensures long-term sustainability for the organization.

Funders should recognize the immense value of "cultural maintenance" work undertaken by cultural workers, whose efforts to implement large scale events are central to creating and strengthening community.

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.

Wallace

The Wallace Foundation
140 Broadway, 49th Fl, New York, NY 10005
Tel (212) 251-9700 | wallacefoundation.org