

## Strengthening Rural Arts Participation

NASAA Assembly 2008, Chattanooga, Tennessee

Saturday, September 13, 2008

**Presented by Cinda Holt, Montana Arts Council**

This session showcased the Montana Arts Council's Building Arts Participation (BAP) initiative and its efforts to strengthen arts participation and community cultural engagement in rural Montana. The BAP program, supported through a grant to the state arts agency from The Wallace Foundation, initially funded 12 Montana organizations to develop arts participation plans. Seven of those organizations were subsequently selected to receive additional implementation grants. Over a three year funding period, each of the seven organizations emphasized a specific dimension of arts participation: broadening audiences, deepening participation or diversifying involvement. With assistance of a program coach, the grantees developed plans, benchmarks and action strategies uniquely suited to their distinct community environments.

As a group, the BAP grantees reported a 30% increase in overall attendance, a 7% increase in single ticket sales, a 20% increase in subscriptions, and a 5% increase in touring proceeds. Overall, the groups' operating budgets increased by an average of 12%. Keys to this success included:

- Structure any project to build collaboration, partnership, and a higher level of communication.
- Understand the culture of the targeted community and respond accordingly.
- Combine relevant programming with the right place.
- Recognize the essential role of volunteers and don't overwhelm them.
- Reach geographically, but not too far. Use hubs and spokes.
- Recognize the realities of staff and volunteer turnover, and make sure more than one person is carrying the torch.
- Evaluate progress and make changes as needed.
- Absorb a participation-building culture. Live it.
- Create something sustainable.

Other keys to success in Montana have been "the three Rs" of relevance, relationships and return on investment. Emphasizing all three has helped the Montana Arts Council and its constituents to build sustainable support for arts participation statewide.

### Recommended Readings

1. *Building Arts Participation in Rural America: The Montana Story* (2004) (part one)

2. *Building Arts Participation in Rural America: Success Stories* (2007) (part two)

For copies of these publications and for more information, contact [Cinda Holt](#) at the Montana Arts Council.

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3. *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts*, published by RAND (2001)

For copies of this and other publications from The Wallace Foundation, contact [Mary Trudel](#) or [www.wallacefoundation.org](http://www.wallacefoundation.org).