Staying Relevant in a Changing Neighborhood, How Fleisher Art Memorial is Adapting to Shifting Community Demographics

Instructor Guide for The Wallace Foundation's Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences

"The Fleisher Art Memorial was created at the turn of the 20th century to bring arts education to people of diverse economic and social backgrounds living in Southeast Philadelphia (p. 1)."

This case study describes how Fleisher recognized a disconnect with its mission statement and the audiences it was serving. The ethnic and economically diverse populations in its surrounding neighborhoods were not part of the audience it was serving when the study began. Fleisher's leaders outlined a plan to reframe perceptions of Fleisher within its community, reimagine programming efforts, and leverage an internal culture that celebrates diversity, equity and inclusion. Explore in detail what research methods Fleisher implemented to find out the perceptions that existed of the organization within the neighboring communities and how these findings influenced entirely new approaches to fulfilling Fleisher's mission and reaching people of all diverse economic and social backgrounds living in Southeast Philadelphia.

Key Themes & Subject Areas

1. **Research Methodology Translated to Practical Application** - Three objectives were established for an initial research phase to inform program development at Fleischer:
   ● Identify the demographics, attitudes, and needs of Fleischer's current visitors, including an in-depth look at those living in Southeast Philadelphia
   ● Uncover and analyze perceptions of Fleischer among immigrant, African American, and low-income Southeast Philadelphia residents not yet coming to Fleisher
   ● Document the attitudes those Southeast Philadelphia residents held toward art and what kinds of art they already pursued or would like to purse

Visitor surveys, student focus groups, community leader interviews, and neighborhood ethnography explorations including participant observation and semi-structured interviews with neighborhood residents were used to establish a clear vision of Fleisher's community. Detailed key findings are shared from each research component beginning on page 20. A range of complex barriers was presented through these

studies including "procural, economic, cultural, linguistic, technological, and practical factors (p. 28)." The influence of these findings can be seen throughout the case study as Fleischer re-imagines how it can break down these barriers with new approaches to programming and staff training.

2. **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion** - Focus groups featuring representatives of diverse ethnic groups residing in Fleisher's surrounding neighborhoods were held to discuss and explore ways that Fleischer "could raise its profile in the neighborhood and build trust with residents (p. 36)." Three themes emerged from these conversations as the perspective of Fleisher's target audience: "come to us," "show us," and "welcome us." These phrases became the basis for Fleischer's approach to relationship-building activities.

3. **Changing External Perceptions of an Organization**- Fleischer was perceived as a place to "pursue a Eurocentric approach to art making" and therefore was assumed to have "limited relevance to the everyday lives, interests, and backgrounds of many community members who didn't share that heritage (p. 33)." A paid part-time position was created for FAMbassadors who "facilitate a two-way conversation with neighborhood residents about Fleisher and with Fleisher about community needs and opportunities (p. 65)." Feedback from FAMbassadors is being used to develop workshops that relate to culturally specific art forms and are relevant to the diverse communities of South Philadelphia and therefore extend the relevance of Fleischer's programming further into these communities.

4. **Revising Internal Culture and Behaviors** - A new Visitor Services role was created to "develop and manage strategies to make Fleischer more welcoming and easier to navigate for visitors of all backgrounds (p. 42)." To prepare the team at Fleischer to welcome all members of the community and develop a sense of diversity awareness, a multiphase, comprehensive training program was established for all full-time staff that included "sharing research findings, site visits to community partners' facilities, "cultural competency" training for understanding and working with diverse audiences, and a series of on-site workshops with facilitators from social-service agencies (p. 44)." Internal communication tools were also re-designed following focus group feedback so that populations with more limited English vocabularies could understand the kinds of art that Fleisher teaches (p. 66).

Teaching Concepts

1. Discuss why a **complete organizational overhaul** was necessary including internal culture, programming, and marketing materials in order to reach the diverse populations in South Philadelphia and make them feel welcome at Fleischer, returning the organization back to **fulfilling its mission**.

2. Examine the role that Fleischer's **research goals and methods** played to educate the organization of perceptions that existed about the organization within its community and how decisions were made to strategically reposition programs in response to the feedback received from each research component.

3. Read "***In Their Own Words***" on pages 38-39 and talk about the different barriers that community residents presented during focus groups that kept them from participating in Fleischer's art classes. Then have students read "***Colorwheels Events***" on page 63 and discuss what other programs students can think of that would reach this community and make them feel comfortable and invited to Fleisher. Consider breaking your students into teams to come up with new programming ideas together and present them to the class.

4. **Building sustained community engagement** can be a long, slow process. Review "*Change Comes Slowly*" on page 76, and have a conversation with your students about Fleischer's relationship-based approach with neighborhood groups as opposed to strategies for engagement that target specific groups such as a Mexican community in the neighborhood (p.77). What other community engagement strategies can your students develop that might produce diverse audiences with long-term organizational engagement, that continue to expand as neighborhood demographics continue shifting?