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On The Road in New Mexico

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On the Road in New Mexico

Stan Hutton

As the wagons went forward and the sun sank lower, a sweep of red carnelian-coloured hills lying at the foot of the mountains came into view; they curved like two arms about a depression in the plain; and in that depression was Santa Fe, at last!

Willa Cather
Death Comes for the Archbishop

For a few of us, Santa Fe marked the halfway point of an eight-day journey that began at the Hyatt Regency Tamaya, a golf and spa resort outside of Albuquerque, site of the annual Grantmakers for Education conference. Before the final chalupa was eaten at the GIA conference in Taos, I had endured over a dozen shuttle bus rides, three hotel rooms, one mini snowstorm, and one chimichanga.

New Mexico has a rich cultural history. It is an amalgam of Native American and Mesoamerican customs, and, from the Spanish colonial period, traditions and practices of the Moors, Romans, and Jews. I learned this on the plane to Albuquerque while reading Juan Estevan Arellano's *Reader* essay, "Taos: Where Cultures Met Four Hundred Years Ago."

So I arrived in Albuquerque with a sense of wonder about the place and its long history. As I stood on the curb waiting for my first shuttle bus ride to my first hotel, I thought about how New Mexico's deep cultural heritage could inform my approach to the three conferences I was about to attend; one about education, one about the arts, and one about bringing the two together.

It is always risky to generalize about the characteristics of any group, but I believe a case can be made that education funders and arts funders operate in different cultures. To some extent, this reflects the professional experience of the grantmakers. Arts funders tend to come from the arts; education funders from the field of education. Different experiences create different beliefs.

The scale of grantmaking in the two areas also is different. According to the Foundation Center, grants for education made up nearly a quarter of total foundation giving in 2006; grant dollars for arts and culture were about half of that amount.

Education grantmakers battle to make a difference in a field that is dominated by public money and, consequently, subject to political winds at the local, state, and federal

levels. (The arts, of course, are not immune to politics either.) Because the public education system is so massive and such a vast amount of money is spent on it, education funders must look for leverage points through which educational systems (schools, school districts, state and federal funding structures) can be altered.

Arts funders, on the other hand, operate in a world where public funding is in short supply. The museums, dance and opera companies, symphonies, and other arts organizations in this country are funded almost entirely by the contributions of private benefactors, including foundations, and earned income.

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Arts grantmakers also must address questions about the effectiveness of their funding. In this era of evaluation and accountability, it is not easy to find measurable outcomes for grants to the arts. Does an arts organization with the lowest overhead and the best theory of change produce the best art?

Education funders have their own issues when it comes to accountability. The most glaring example is No Child Left Behind; praised by some for highlighting deficits in the educational achievement of minority students, damned by others for its simplistic approach to assessment and its punitive measures for schools that fail to produce enough students who perform adequately on computer-scored multiple choice tests.

The point I am trying to make is that education funders are by and large working to change large systems in order to close the achievement gap, lower the high-school dropout rate, and increase the number of students who attend and graduate from college. No one can argue that these are not worthy goals. However, it can be argued, I believe, that the pursuit of these goals has shifted our attention from what a quality education should be.

Of course, many students in the country already are beneficiaries of a quality education. They attend independent schools, well-funded public schools most often found in suburban communities, and schools in urban areas that have visionary and dedicated principals and teachers. We know how to do it. We just can't seem to do it for everyone.

What should a quality education encompass? Certainly, the arts must be included and so must history, geography, science, languages, and mathematics. But even more than that, our education system must figure out a way to pay



closer attention to the individual student. We all have different interests, talents, strengths, and weaknesses. If we are not able to identify these differences and use them to guide and encourage students to fulfill their promise, we will continue to struggle to provide a quality education to all our children.

To me, this was the essence of the message of the Arts and Education Weekend in Santa Fe. By withholding opportunities from our children to play an instrument, sing a song, act in a theater, paint a picture, or write a poem we are failing to recognize the potential of individual children and leaving far too many of them behind.

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