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New York Knows Its Arts Organizations Have a Diversity Problem. Now What?

The city asked cultural institutions, including museums and performing arts centers, to draw up plans to make their staff and board members more diverse.



The Public Theater is one of 65 cultural institutions in New York asked to participate in a demographic survey of its employees and volunteers. Credit: Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

By Julia Jacobs

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In a city that prides itself on both the diversity of its population and its globally recognized cultural institutions, there is a lopsided reality: While about two-thirds of New Yorkers are people of color, two-thirds of the people who run its cultural institutions are white.

This disparity is outlined in the results of a new study, commissioned by the administration of Mayor Bill de Blasio and released Monday, that relies on a survey of institutions that receive city funding, including museums, theaters, zoos and botanical gardens.

The study, conducted from August to October of 2018, looked at behemoths like Carnegie Hall and the Metropolitan Museum of Art as well as smaller organizations like the Staten Island Historical Society. It found that among the arts workers surveyed, some groups historically discriminated against — including women (65 percent) and disabled people (8 percent) — were actually overrepresented. Gay, lesbian, bisexual or queer individuals constituted 15 percent of the work force.

But when it came to race, the study found that people of color were significantly underrepresented, especially when looking at [upper-level leadership positions and board members](#).

After years spent measuring and [analyzing the problem](#), the city is now asking organizations to work on fixing it. In recent months, 33 cultural institutions on city-owned property submitted plans to boost diversity and inclusion among their staff and visitors; if they failed to do so, the city warned, their funding could be cut.

The plans were filled with organizational charts and multistep processes for diversifying their employees and making people of all backgrounds feel comfortable visiting their sites.

“This is what our city looks like, and this is what we should look like,” said Shanta Thake, the senior director of artistic programs at the Public Theater, which set a goal for its full-time staff to be no more than 50 percent white by 2023. (It’s currently 57 percent white.)

But the question of accountability remained: How far would the city go to hold these groups to their plans?

The demographic survey, which was completed by Southern Methodist University and largely funded by a grant from [Deutsche Bank](#), collected information from employees and volunteers at the 33 institutions on city-owned property and 32 others that receive city money. But while the study showed, for example, that 11 percent of arts workers surveyed are Hispanic, compared with 29 percent of New York’s population, and that 10 percent are black (compared with 22 percent), the city does not know which organizations have the biggest diversity problems. The study was based on employees’ self-reporting, and the institutions themselves were not required to submit their comprehensive data to the city.

Tom Finkelppearl, the cultural affairs commissioner, said in an interview that the goal was not to force organizations to divulge their own demographics but to get a “good faith effort” out of the groups.

“We are very careful about the idea that we are not encouraging quotas,” he said. “We are encouraging practices that are going to result in diverse workforces.”

So MoMA PS1, for example, said it had ended unpaid internships, which are often a barrier to low-income workers; Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts said it would analyze salary equity; the Wildlife Conservation Society, which runs four zoos and the New York Aquarium, said it planned to create a mentoring program for employees seeking to move up.



The Brooklyn Children’s Museum decided to create numerical targets for boosting diversity and inclusion. Credit: Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

The plans, which run about 500 pages collectively, often use vague corporate terms like “strategic pillar” and “recruiting pipeline.” Some groups took a more analytical approach, drawing up specific numerical goals for diversity in the coming years.

The Public Theater, which puts on Shakespeare in the Park, noted a racial disparity at the top echelon. Currently, 23 percent of its trustees are people of color, the group reported. It set a goal of at least 35 percent by 2023.

The Brooklyn Children’s Museum in Crown Heights was attuned to whether the leadership reflected a significant portion of its audience: families from Central Brooklyn, who are predominantly people of color. Within six years, the group said, it wanted to ensure that more than half of the members of the museum’s executive team are people

of color and more than 75 percent of its business contracts are with vendors based in Brooklyn.

Stephanie Wilchfort, the chief executive of the children's museum, said that for many organizations, the challenge is that the managers at the top often have trouble recognizing systemic flaws in their institutions and agreeing to share power with others.

“We have a hierarchical structure,” Ms. Wilchfort said. “That structure has been in place, in our case, for 120 years. Some of these plans need to reflect that power is more diffuse than it was.”

At the American Museum of Natural History, 12 percent of board members were people of color in 2014, before the city's diversity push. That number climbed as the museum focused on increasing that percentage, setting a goal of at least 20 percent. (When asked what percentage of current board members are people of color, the museum said it had actually surpassed its goal and reached 21 percent.)

Ellen Futter, the president of the museum, said that although the museum set an initial percentage goal, its leaders “don't think the numerical approach is key here.” Their plan invests in developing and supporting a pipeline of diverse scientists, she said.



The American Museum of Natural History included a section in its diversity plan about problems with the framing of its cultural halls. Credit: Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

Part of the museum's diversity problem has long been apparent in the content of its halls. In its plan, the museum admitted that many of its cultural displays include "presentations of non-Western cultures from colonialist or imperialist perspectives" that "do not reflect the values" of the museum. At the same time that the museum is working to improve problematic exhibits — like [the Northwest Coast Hall](#), which opened in 1899 and has been criticized for failing to include context about how its artifacts were taken from Indigenous people — Futter said it was committed to hiring people with diverse cultural identities. Those efforts naturally align, she said.

In 2017, [Mr. de Blasio pledged to link future funding](#) for museums and arts groups to the diversity of their employees and board members. None are facing a loss of funding right now, but could in the future if they don't follow through on their plans, said Mr. Finkelparl, the cultural affairs commissioner.

For the groups with smaller staffs, there was some concern about a lack of resources to respond to the city's requests. Cathy Hung, the executive director of the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning in Queens, said the group has nine full-time staff members and that producing a diversity plan of several pages was easier to achieve at a large organization with a budget many times its own.

If the government doesn't offer additional financial support, Ms. Hung said, the diversity plan could be just another document required by a government agency rather than a tool for change.

A spokesman for the cultural affairs department said that city officials recognized that their demands were more of a burden on smaller organizations, and the city provided \$130,000 to consortiums of groups based in Queens and Staten Island.

"My feeling — and I've been to many board meetings — is that this is being embraced," Mr. Finkelparl said of the diversity push. "Everyone has the right to have the expectation that the cultural life of New York City should be reflective of the communities."