

The Lowe Down: Bureaucracy or innovation in the arts?

By [Jim Lowe](#)

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What is a creative network? More than 180 of Vermont's top arts administrators, artists, arts educators and creative types descended on Montpelier's Vermont College of Fine Arts last week to find the answer.

"We don't know yet," explained Zon Eastes, who is spearheading the creation of the Vermont Creative Network for the Vermont Arts Council. "The work is coming from you and the state of Vermont."

Refreshing, throughout the two-day conference, was that the importance of artistic expression wasn't trampled by discussions of "economic impact." Yes, the arts have an integral role in the economy, but that's just not what they are all about. They serve a much-deeper purpose.

Tom Green, president of hosting VCA, underscored that when he said the key to founding the graduate arts school was "mission not money."

This quite frankly exciting summit was midway in the Vermont Arts Council's project to create a collective sense in Vermont's burgeoning but fragmented creative sector, hoping to replicate the state's successful farm-to-plate collaborations. The summit's organizers bent over backwards to insist that this project is not limited to the arts, but the participants were nearly all if not entirely from Vermont's arts world.

Previously this year the arts council conducted public forums around the state. That they were attended by some 750, most of whom had a large investment in Vermont's arts world, was indicative of the need. At the Manchester forum, it was also clear that most of the needs are shared — primarily marketing and fundraising. Vermont's artists have the creative expertise, thank you.

While the answer to the original question wasn't answered, participants were offered some 25 workshops that dealt with many of the needs of Vermont's arts sector. These sessions covered myriad subject areas, from arts education, to finance, to networking and collaboration.

As one person, my sampling was limited but almost universally rewarding. And the six sets of 90-minute sessions were intimate enough, a dozen to 20 participants, to answer individual needs.

My first session gave me an understanding of Vermont's pre-eminent collective funder, the Vermont Community Fund and how it does and does not serve the arts. At "Five Best Ideas to Ignite Your Organization," the Flynn Center's John Killacky, told of the center's experience taking inclusion beyond physical accessibility to becoming welcoming to folks with a variety of special needs. Another idea was "collision," where disparate partners led to imaginative solutions and stifled territorialism.

One session chronicled the creation of an arts network in Massachusetts' Pioneer Valley, and how it resulted in unexpected economic development in low income areas. Another success — including many failures along the way — was detailed in a discussion of Burlington's South End Alliance in community organizing to create a distinct arts sector.

The evolution of the National Core Arts Standards in the school, and what needs to happen for them to hold was discussed by Erika Lowe, the arts council's new education manager. A Results Based Accountability session challenged arts folks to define themselves in concrete ways in order to communicate with funders and others.

Despite the multitude of sessions, they barely scratched the surface of what needs to happen. But this is an excellent start.

The summit seemed somewhat Burlington-centric, though participation was statewide. The only misstep though, was a lunch session on Vermont branding with heads of Vermont Public Radio, Vermont Public Television, the Department of Tourism and Seven Days magazine. It turned out to be more of an advertisement for the aforementioned, which was too bad: VPR and Seven Days operate two of the most effective marketing machines in Vermont.

Perhaps most inspiring was the second-day luncheon speaker, Hal Colston, creator of the Good News Garage and currently director of Chittenden County's Partnership for Change. His message, oversimplified, was that passion and partnership can overcome financial issues on the path to success.

The Vermont Creative Network is slated to be launched formally in 2016. What that will look like — Will it be just a new bureaucracy or an innovative approach to success? — I cannot be sure. But this is looking to become major contribution to Vermont by its state and federally funded Vermont Arts Council.

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