

**Supporting Racial Equity *In and Through* the Arts**  
**An Assessment of CAFC's Collective Action Against Racism and Inequity Series**  
**November 1, 2020**

Angela K. Frusciante, MRP, PhD



## Summary

The year 2020 has been overwhelmed by an unimaginable pandemic and an increasing magnitude of civil unrest and protest in response to racial injustice. The year has also been marked by organizations that met these unbelievable challenges with innovation. The Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County (CAFC) is one of those organizations. During weekly CAFC “Community Calls,” designed for members to support each other through the intersecting health and social crises, CAFC members expressed a desire for a collective response to the racial violence and racism affecting the county and the nation.

This report includes data from the *Reimagining the Arts and Culture* public conversations aspect of CAFC’s **Collective Action Against Racism and Inequity (CAARI)** series, an initial response of the CAFC leadership and membership. The report highlights that unrealized potential exists in the arts and culture community in Fairfield County, a community that holds amazing creativity and commitment.



The success of these public conversations and the membership’s commitment to continuing action indicates that providing the CAFC network with supports and opportunities to learn together and act against, racism and inequity can have an exponential affect – magnifying the impact from initial investments. CAFC is positioned to provide key supports necessary for emergent action in the arts and cultural network of Fairfield County

The first part of the CAARI series was co-designed and facilitated by OnBeat Consulting as a set of three public conversations named *Reimagining Arts and Culture*. The sessions included conversations entitled: Race, Power and Privilege in the Arts; Empathy in Times of Crisis and Moving from Empathy to Action.

One hundred and three people registered for the sessions, representing approximately a fifth of membership. There was a range in registrant characteristics across all categories tracked. Registrant responses to questions about past anti-racism and change activities showed there is a wide range of exposure, skills, experiences and talent in the CAFC network.

Fifty-three (53) people attended the sessions, including board members, directors, staff, consultants and independent artists. Forty-one (41) anonymous feedback surveys were submitted. Participants expressed appreciation for the series and being with others committed to equity work. Respondents indicated a desire for honest dialogue and emphasized wanting tools and action-oriented engagement.

At the time of writing, two CAARI workshops had been conducted with participants continuing to work together in action teams to develop targeted anti-racism and equity strategies. These teams are in the initial stages of forming an emergent community of practice that has the potential to become a self-creative equity laboratory whose lessons learned will provide benefits for the region and state moving forward.

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## **Background**

The year 2020 will forever be associated with the intersecting pandemics of Covid-19 and Racial Injustice. It will also be marked by the organizations that met these immense challenges with innovation and responsiveness. The Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County (CAFC) was poised to do just this. CAFC had already begun to envision what would make effective equity programming in the context of the arts and creative placemaking. Public conversations about creative placemaking and a growing initiative called Sowing Equity and Engagement by Design (SEED) were already underway when the pandemic hit. When membership, amidst the growing racial protests, requested support in anti-racism, it is not surprising that CAFC took steps to respond with the *Collective Action Against Racism and Inequity* (CAARI) series. The first component of the CAARI activities has been a series of three public conversations presented in partnership with OnBeat Consulting, an organizational design, coaching and training practice with a racial equity and justice lens.

This report, the first sharing from a process and implementation evaluation, documents the design and membership of the public conversation aspect of CAARI. Most importantly, our data includes registrant and participant ongoing input and feedback about the sessions. We are capturing this input to inform and maximize the impact of the ongoing CAFC equity work.

## **2020 as a time for Action**

During weekly CAFC “Community Calls,” designed for members to support each other through the intersecting health and social crises of the pandemic, members expressed a desire for a collective response to the racial violence and racism affecting the county and the nation. Describing the membership’s request and CAFC’s decision to develop CAARI, David Green notes: “There was an interest both in going beyond the statements of concern that many organizations were publishing over the surge in racial violence, but in working together on some collective action that could make a difference both in the immediate future and in the ongoing work of constituent organizations: what could we do together?”

The CAFC leadership understood that socio-economic disparity is not new in Fairfield County. CAFC knew that the arts community would be hit hard economically by the pandemic, making it that much more difficult to focus attention on issues of racial equity. CAFC knew that there would never be a “perfect” response or a perfect time to act. CAFC also knew that supporting the arts and culture community needed to happen now. Even if not perfectly; even if not fully resourced, even if needing innovation and risk; CAFC knew that this was a critical time to do more than craft a statement against

racism. CAFC knew that together, the arts community could do more to take action against racism. The membership request and constituent feedback led directly to the implementation of CAARI.

### **CAARI emerges as the next step**

Collective Action Against Racism and Inequity (CAARI) emerged as the next step forward for CAFC. CAARI's initial design included a series of three public conversations. The conversations were offered in conjunction with a workshop series designed to support the development of action teams and a continued community of practice to support ongoing learning amongst the CAFC community. (The following data refers solely to the public conversations as these have been completed. The workshop results will be reported on later as they are currently underway.)



As CAFC background materials note:

These conversations and working sessions are designed for independent artists, organizations, and associations that promote the arts, culture, and creative expression, as well as community members, already under significant duress from the global pandemic, who feel the adverse forces of inequity, and are interested in learning about the intersection of the arts and the national movement to dismantle racism in America...

The *Reimagining Arts and Culture* conversations were co-designed and facilitated by OnBeat Consulting. These conversations, titled *Reimagining Arts and Culture*, were designed for:

examining and interrupting dominant arts and culture stories that have excluded and misrepresented Black and Indigenous People of Color. Sessions will ground participants using key terminology/theories, support to move beyond shame, anger or guilt and coach participants to engage in more inclusive/equitable activity.

As Valeria Lopez, founder and director of OnBeat Consulting stated:

Our intent was to provide participants with frameworks to examine power and privilege in their own lives, work and communities. We grounded our work in the belief that dismantling systems of oppression is first and foremost self-work. We designed sessions to move participants through a progression that culminated in a courageous conversation on action.

### **Designing for equity**

An overview of the sessions follows. The conversations were creatively designed to each include a co-facilitator whose expertise highlighted key aspects of equity work.

Each session began with a Land Acknowledgement. The Land Acknowledgement is a recognition of the indigenous peoples who stewarded the land prior to European colonization. The acknowledgement is not a judgement but rather an awareness that there is a history that existed in this place prior to European settlement.

**Conversation 1: Race, Power and Privilege in the Arts** included Kristen Barnes, a diversity practitioner with experience in policy and social psychology. The first session incorporated both content basics and experiential foundations that are important to engaging in equity work. Content centered on how inequity shows up in the arts, issues of identity and intersectionality, and understandings of white privilege and diversity. Experiential foundations included setting norms of “brave” space for the group, expecting self-reflection and discussion, calling for the group to share their own definitions and lived experience as part of the learning and meaning making.

**Conversation 2: Empathy in Times of Crisis** involved Kei Anisah, a healing artist and creative movement practitioner. This session focused emotions as a key aspect of learning. Through slides, discussion, and break out groups, participants were exposed to tools and activities to better grasp the ways in which the whole body is engaged in equity work.

**Conversation 3: Moving from Empathy to Action** brought in Andrea Lopez, a co-facilitator with specific analytic and research skills to model using lived experience data, derived in real time from participants to inform action. The content of the session included terminology such as cultural equity, equality vs. equity and notions and nuances around white allyship.

During design, the facilitation team anticipated various challenges with introducing equity work to the CAFC membership. It was expected that the majority of participants would identify as white. The series undoubtedly needed to serve as both an introduction for some members and as a deepening experience for members who had already reflected upon, and even taken action against, racism. There would also be challenges in utilizing a virtual platform, rather than having direct in-person experiences. Finally, these challenges would present themselves to participants with a wide range of expectations for these sessions.

### **Registration information**

One hundred and three people registered for the session, representing approximately a fifth of membership, and a much greater number than had been represented on any of the individual “Community Calls”

There was a range in registrant characteristics across all categories tracked. Registrants primarily identified as white, at about 76%, and primarily female, at 83%. Registrants identified with the following categories: Nonprofit or Cultural Organization (45%), Independent Artist (18%), Independent Other (17%), Other (9%), For Profit (6%) and Library (4%). There was a range in stated roles, including Board members, Executive Directors, Staff, Consultant and Independent Artist and a span of ages from teenager to over 55 years of age.

Registrants shared notes about the types of activities that they had engaged in prior to attending the public conversations. Not surprisingly, there was a range of both type and depth of involvement in anti-racism work. Types of engagement included:

- Awareness-building, such as readings, podcasts, lectures, informational sources, films, following Instagram influencers

- Self-reflection and lived experience
- Discussion, such as exchanges with individuals, community conversations, hearing from diverse perspectives
- Participating in facilitated activities and committees within own organization
- Active participation with other organizations, such as with Black Lives Matter, Women in Arts series, Social Venture Partners, CAFC etc,
- Training, workshops, programs
- Direct community engagement
- Academic training, seminars and research
- Movement work including protests
- Writing and educating others as teacher and consultant

The types of involvement above demonstrate that there is a wide range of exposure, skills and talent in the CAFC network. The level of interest in the CAARI series is additional evidence of the desire for opportunities for shared learning and strategic collective action in the interest of greater equity.

## Participation

Of those registered, 51% attended at least one session. This percentage may seem like a significant drop off. However, the percentage is not surprising given the time pressures that always exist in the arts and culture community which are now compounded by the pandemic and “Zoom Fatigue.” Documentation in 2020 of the registrant to attendance “conversion rate” amongst membership organizations and other event planners ranges from 45% to 54% for free virtual events.<sup>1</sup> (<https://blog.bizzabo.com/virtual-event-benchmarks>; <https://www.wildapricot.com/blogs/newsblog/2020/08/25/virtual-event-statistics>).

There was no apparent pattern between those people who registered and did or did not attend, nor did there seem to be any clear relationship amongst participant characteristics and the number of sessions attended. The Reimagining Arts and Culture sessions “retention rate” of those attending two, or all three, sessions was 26% and 21% respectively.

Once in the session, participants mostly remained throughout the length of the sessions. Although the chat function of ZOOM was used differently in each of the sessions, individual participant use of the chat box did give preliminary evidence of active engagement with the sessions. Some participants also provided feedback via an online survey.

The increasing response rate to the surveys (24% of Session One attendees, 50% of Session 2 attendees and 79% of Session 3 attendees) shows an increasing level of engagement over the series as indicated by the percentage of participants actively providing feedback. Feedback survey responses about how the series met with participant expectations also indicated that there was an increasing alignment of participant desires and session delivery over the course of the series. This was perhaps due to self-selection in attendance but also probably an indicator of growing understanding by participants to using an equity approach to consider action.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://blog.bizzabo.com/virtual-event-benchmarks> and <https://www.wildapricot.com/blogs/newsblog/2020/08/25/virtual-event-statistics>).

## Participant input

In the registration surveys, registrants indicated their desires for the CAARI public conversations. They included:

- **How to's** and **Action steps** for self, organizations, and community and how to create linkages
- **Resources** about concepts such as systemic racism, arts justice, cultural diversity, allyship, language, unconscious and affinity bias etc.
- **Information** (state and national) about what is happening in arts and culture justice
- **Exposure** to multiple perspectives
- **Increased** self-awareness and reflection
- **Identification** of important issues and background of how race has affected access in the arts arena
- **Connection** through discussion, story sharing, and collaboration

Registrants were interested in participating in the above learning. They shared their concerns about their own awareness, feeling uncomfortable talking about race, about using the right language and knowing the issues. Some thought they wouldn't be accepted because of various identities – being white, being black, being Christian, being a white male, or aspects of physical appearance. Some felt they would be judged or come across as ignorant. Others were hesitant about an online format for this particular discussion. They admitted the emotional nature of conversations about privilege and race and how important it is to create a space that is open, authentic and positive.

## Participant feedback

Fifty-three (53) people attended the sessions (excluding those individuals involved with planning, facilitation or technical support for the sessions). Following each session, participants were asked to complete a survey to provide their feedback. Forty-one (41) surveys were completed anonymously. As mentioned above, the responses to general perceptions of the sessions increased, both in rating and in survey participation over the course of the series. This increase in alignment with expectations could indicate that the participants continued to develop an understanding of equity work as the sessions progressed.

Beyond the general question about overall response to the sessions, participants were asked to give feedback about their engagement. This occurred in response to questions about when participants found themselves most engaged or least engaged. The final questions asked participants for key “take aways” and for any additional feedback.

Taken together, the responses to these questions indicated that, overwhelmingly, participants appreciated small group break-out discussions and times in large groups where there was attention to concrete experiences of people of color, either through participant sharing or through video. There were also “aha” moments related to the movement work and appreciation for the conversations about allyship.

Overall, multiple participants expressed difficulty when too much text was presented, trying to keep up with the chat comments and when poll responses were offered.

There were some mixed reactions related to the activities in the break-out rooms with notions of the time being both too short and, for some, too long. Some participants also found responding to questions in break-out rooms challenging.

Participants who responded to the survey expressed overall appreciation for the series and noted the various benefits from being with others who are also committed to equity processes. Of course, there were isolated comments about the scheduling and online environment. However, respondents, across the board, indicated various ways that the sessions had increased their awareness of self, of others, and how attending had supported a better understanding of concepts related to equity, and how equity and the arts intersect.

Lastly, respondents contributed questions and ideas for continued development. Some expressed an appetite for receiving written information or slides related to the sessions. OnBeat Consulting provided these from the sessions and CAFC has set up a resource page for continued resource sharing.

Respondents indicated a desire for more conversations that are honest and candid. There is a desire for dialogue that both supports people in recognizing how their own perspectives may come from a position of power and privilege, and that recognizes allies and avoids stereotyping.

Even as respondents valued the reflective dialogue opportunities, multiple people emphasized wanting to access tools and action-oriented engagement with action referring to identifying things that can be done organizationally or with respect to policy change.

### **Insights for moving forward**

This report included data from the Public Conversations aspect of CAARI. At the time of writing, two CAARI workshops had been completed with a number of participants indeed electing to continue working together in action teams to develop targeted anti-racism and equity strategies. These teams were also in the initial stages of coming together into a learning community that has the potential to become a self-creative equity laboratory. This emergent community of practice is a strong indicator of the value of the initial series to provide opportunity for learning and action that is inextricably linked to impact.

The data from the Public Conversations component also contributes some specific insights for moving forward in a community of practice.

- There is a wide range of skills, experiences, and talents within the CAFC network. These can be both strengthened and tapped into for the purpose of shared learning and action related to anti-racism and equity. There is more opportunity for CAFC to support its membership in developing a better understanding of their own unique context and learning curve as it relates to equity work.
- Given the wide range of skills and exposure to anti-racism and equity efforts, a key challenge for CAFC will be to intertwine basic concepts with opportunities to learn together through action as a way of deepening understanding, ease, and the experiential “muscle” needed for impact.

- There are undoubtedly factors influencing who can commit to attending this type of offering at this point in time. That said, there was no clear pattern in participant characteristics collected (race, age, type of organization, role, size of organization, etc.) to help us understand what factors may contribute to level of availability or commitment. There is an ongoing opportunity to better understand membership desires, and to continue to align offerings across the range of needs in the CAFC network.<sup>2</sup>
- The arts and culture community already plays a key social role. Providing the CAFC network with opportunities to increase skills in, and strategically organize and act against, racism and inequity promises to have an exponential affect – magnifying impact far beyond initial investments.

CAFC had begun to manifest its commitment to anti-racism and greater equity in the region. Offering this series achieved the goals, as requested by the membership, while also presenting a great opportunity to collect feedback from participants. This data can help to illuminate the continuing needs and opportunities for development. Unrealized potential exists in the arts and culture community in Fairfield County, a community that holds amazing creativity and commitment. Even given the immense contemporary challenges, some members are dedicated and poised to engage actively in co-creating a community of practice targeted toward achieving greater equity. Pairing this potential with essential, equitable structures important to supporting collective action is a valuable initiative that CAFC can take to direct the network's energy into critical equity and change in the region.

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<sup>2</sup> CAFC is itself a participating organization in the CAARI workshops and community of practice and is working toward organizational actions to dismantle racism and inequity. Its Executive Director and two current Board members are participating in the CAARI community of practice.