

Rethinking the Creative Economy: Participatory Action Research with Artists and Artisans in the Greater Franklin County

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Project Overview

Franklin County is a culturally rich region where artists and artisans contribute to a diverse range of economic activity that is difficult to measure using the standard economic metrics and is challenging to address through a dependence on exogenous development efforts. The aim of this project is to highlight and support the diverse economic activity of the artists and artisans in the region. Making visible the rich economic activities already in practice can help the region foster a positive economic identity—shifting away from the portrayals of a region in need—and provide an opportunity to direct funding towards community centered, or endogenous economic practices. Through the use of participatory action research (PAR) with a group of artists and cultural ambassadors, we will create a community partnership of people who: are taught how to recognize various forms of economic activity, are given tools and resources to record and document these activities, and are provided with consultation to identify practices and endeavors that can strengthen those activities. With the Fostering Art and Culture Project (FACP) we will create a venue through which this data can be shared and disseminated across Franklin County and beyond.

The FACP is a collaborative project with Greenfield Community College, the Franklin County Chamber of Commerce, the Franklin County Community Development Corporation, RiverCulture, the Shelburne Falls Area Business Association, and local artists. The FACP was originally funded as part of Congressman Olver's Northern Tier Initiative which identified the creative economy as a foci for the region. The FACP has received funding to develop a countywide marketing plan, five pilot project sites, a website portal, and a small PAR cohort.

Methods

Working collaboratively with the FACP, and utilizing the models employed by J.K. Gibson-Graham in their Community Economies projects, the project co-coordinators, **Abby Templer** (University of Massachusetts, Sociology), and **Leo Hwang-Carlos** (University of Massachusetts, Geosciences; Greenfield Community College, Associate Dean of Humanities) will draw from and contribute to the construction of dialogue around the creation and recognition of diverse economic practices in the creative economy. We currently aim to recruit and train 10 artist and artisan researchers live and create in the greater Franklin County community.

We will seek to draw a demographically diverse representation from various genres of artists and craftspeople (writers, painters, musicians, wood workers, potters, sculptors, photographers, DIY, etc.), and various sectors of the creative economy (technology, design, etc.). We will also seek participation from local governments

and the Franklin County Council of Governments so that we can have the opportunity to contribute to creating and changing regional development policy in ways that support the creative economy of Franklin County.

The project co-coordinators will provide training in: looking for diverse economic practices, cultivating reflexivity and understanding positionality, interviewing techniques, and training on comfortably using digital recorders. Each researcher will then be responsible for completing a minimum of five interviews over eight weeks that explore their peer artists and artisans and the diverse kinds of economic activity in which they are engaged. We will meet with the researchers after the second set of interviews for a preliminary debriefing and trouble-shooting session, and will provide an introduction to collaborative analysis. We will meet again at the end of the project to share our findings and participate in a collaborative analysis and select strong practices that the group would like to promote or strengthen in the region.

We will host a community event to share the findings of the project. Since the researchers are artists themselves, we will invite them to create a work in their medium representing the process or their findings, which they will then share with the public along with their analysis. We will also work with groups to help them find resources or develop action plans around the projects they would like to strengthen or foster in the region.

Project Goals

The goals of the participatory action research (PAR) are (1) to create a pool of indigenous knowledge about the broad range of economic activities that artists and artisans participate in, and how these activities impact the community; (2) create avenues to share this knowledge with the region to increase an understanding of how artists and artisans impact our communities; (3) work with artists and artisans to select activities that foster the growth and adaptation of existing diverse economic practices; and (4) assist the community in recognizing available resources and possible funding sources to support and strengthen their creative economy.

In addition, the project coordinators will publish findings in print and electronic formats, present at local and national conferences, actively seek forums that will assist Franklin County's endeavors to obtain support and funding for the creative economy, and through a consulting role, help foster the development or expansion of promising practices uncovered through the PAR component of the project. The coordinators also hope to build an interdisciplinary (sociology and geography) curriculum designed to utilize PAR for community economies where we will teach students at the University of Massachusetts and Greenfield Community College how to utilize the tools of PAR to research their own communities and identify opportunities for development.

Success Measures

