



It's Time to Change the Story About the Arts

October 17, 2024

An open letter to the arts community from the Director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts

Dear arts community,

It's the most prevalent story about the arts sector in Canada right now.

I heard it often in my first year as Director and CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts. I heard it when meeting with artists, arts leaders and policy makers in communities across the country. I also heard it on the news. I've even told it myself, and maybe you have too.

But it's time for us to change this story—before we lose our chance.

The crisis story

The story goes something like this: the arts sector is in crisis. Arts organizations across the country are on the brink of closure, some have already shuttered their doors for good. At the same time, artists and arts workers are leaving the sector for more sustainable fields. Something must be done, the story usually concludes, before we lose it all.

I wish I could say we need to change this story because it's untrue. Unfortunately, much of it is accurate. We confirmed this with the preliminary findings of a survey the Council held with the sector this past summer that highlighted significant challenges.

So, if the arts sector is truly facing a crisis, what's wrong with telling this crisis story?

I believe it's missing two crucial elements that all of us need to start telling now.

What's missing from the story

For one, the “So what?” of the crisis story is often unclear. The arts are facing monumental challenges. Organizations will close, artists and arts workers will leave the sector. The arts ecosystem could collapse. So what?

For those of us in the arts, the answers might be obvious. But we can't assume that's true for everyone—especially not decision makers.

So what? Well, the arts matter to Canadians. They have a significant impact on society—culturally, socially and economically. Canadians have just as much to lose in this crisis as we do.

The second part missing from the crisis story is that strong, sustained public funding is essential. It's needed to support the arts through this challenging moment. It's equally needed to help the sector to continue to transform and become more sustainable so that it can keep making its vital contributions in the longer term.

Telling the impact story

As I meet with decision makers across the country, I'm leading with the impact story instead of the crisis.

I'm talking to them about the significant economic impact of the arts. The arts and culture sector contributes \$60 billion towards Canada's GDP and employs over 850,000 people in cultural jobs. The arts attract businesses, which invest in communities. They draw tourists from all over the world, with arts and culture tourism having three times more economic impact than other types of tourism.

I'm also talking about how the arts give Canadians a sense of belonging. The arts create experiences of shared joy, and they bring us together to talk about difficult topics that might otherwise divide us.

When I tell the impact story, I often draw on examples of your work, which the Council has supported in over 2,000 communities across the country, in all artistic disciplines, at every stage of the creative process. Artists and arts organizations in all parts of our country exemplify brilliance and innovation. I am deeply inspired by your talent, passion and creativity.

I emphasize to decision makers that public investment is an important part of the arts impact story. And this support matters at the federal, provincial, territorial and municipal levels. The combination of public and private investment along with earned revenue allows the arts ecosystem to thrive.

We need to amplify this story together.

An urgent call

All of us in the arts need to start telling the impact story to our decision makers, and we need to do it right now.

I call on all of you—arts leaders, artists and arts workers—to meet with the decision makers in your communities, or write them, as soon as you finish reading this.

Tell them about your impact story, whatever it may be. You might tell them about a project that helped your community explore a local issue. You might share the number of people you bring into your community to see your work who also, as a result, visit other local businesses. Each of us will have a different impact story to tell, but together they will create a powerful narrative.

And let them know that public support for the arts has been a part of your success, that it's needed for the arts to keep contributing to the lives of Canadians.

Tell this story to your audiences, volunteers and donors, too. And encourage them to tell their decision makers how much the arts matter in their lives.

It would be easy to ignore this call, but it will be impossible to ignore what happens next if we do.

Let's change the story about the arts together by leading with our impact—economically, socially and culturally, in all parts of the country, in communities big and small. And let's share this story widely, with members of the public and decision makers alike.

Michelle Chawla
Director and CEO

Tagged As [Announcements](#) [Funding](#) [Council Update](#)

Find out more about funding opportunities

GRANTS

PRIZES

STRATEGIC FUNDS

SUBSCRIBE TO THE MAILING LIST



150 Elgin St | P.O. Box 1047 | Ottawa, ON Canada | K1P 5V8
1-800 263-5588 | 613 566-4414

Âjagemô
Exhibition Space

VIEW CURRENT EXHIBIT

At the Canada Council for the Arts
Open daily from 7am to 9pm