

The Tension Between Arts and Education

Structure vs. Agency in the Realm of Philanthropy

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Introduction

Full Spectrum Features (FSF), a Chicago-based nonprofit organization (NPO), navigates a complex identity as both an arts and educational institution. This dual identity necessitates a nuanced approach to funding acquisition, as FSF must present itself effectively to attract grants from different philanthropic entities. The inherent tension between arts and education, compounded by societal devaluation of the arts, presents significant challenges for FSF. This study examines how FSF uses self-presentation as a form of agency to navigate its identity within the philanthropic structures of the United States. The purpose of this analysis is to enhance FSF's funding prospects.

Organizational Identity and Funding Challenges

FSF's mission is twofold: promoting equity in the independent film industry by supporting diverse filmmakers and educating the public on social and cultural issues through cinema. However, these dual objectives create a paradox. Internally, FSF staff experience tension between artistic and educational priorities, reflecting broader societal attitudes that often marginalize the arts in favor of more tangible, market-related values. This internal discord can undermine FSF's ability to present a cohesive identity to potential funders.

Philanthropic Structures and Nonprofit Agency

Philanthropic structures in the U.S. are influenced by historical, cultural, and ideological factors. NPOs like FSF must navigate these structures by presenting themselves in ways that align with funders' expectations and priorities. The concept of "self-presentation," as defined by sociologist Erving Goffman, plays a critical role here. FSF must strategically manage its image to be perceived favorably by funders, which involves highlighting different aspects of its mission depending on the audience.

Research Design and Methodology

This study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews with FSF staff and external collaborators to gather insights into how the organization navigates its dual identity. Analytic memos and interpretive analysis were used to identify patterns and themes from the interview data. The findings revealed a disconnect between FSF's internal articulation of its identity and its external presentation. This disconnect poses a significant challenge to securing funding, as funders may perceive FSF in ways that do not align with its intended self-presentation.

Findings and Discussion

The research identified several key findings:

1. **Dominant Arts Identity:** Despite its dual mission, FSF primarily presents itself as an arts organization. This dominant identity can overshadow its educational goals, making it difficult to appeal to funders interested in education. This imbalance is partly due to differing internal values among FSF staff, particularly between creators and educators.
2. **Shapeshifting Strategy:** FSF employs a "shapeshifting" strategy to navigate funding opportunities. By emphasizing either its arts or education focus, depending on the funder, FSF can tailor its presentations to align with funders' priorities. This strategic flexibility is essential for managing funders' inconsistent and sometimes discouraging attitudes.
3. **Internal Tensions:** The internal tension between FSF's artistic and educational missions reflects broader societal values that devalue the arts. This tension impacts the organization's ability to fully embody its dual identity, necessitating strategic self-presentation to manage external perceptions and secure funding.
4. **Need for Trust-Based Philanthropy:** The study advocates for "trust-based philanthropy," which involves providing NPOs with larger, longer-term grants and reducing rigorous reporting requirements. This approach could alleviate some of the financial pressures on NPOs like FSF and support their long-term sustainability.

Recommendations

To enhance its funding prospects, FSF should consider the following recommendations:

1. **Balanced Identity Presentation:** FSF needs to develop a more balanced presentation of its dual identity. This could involve creating targeted marketing materials that equally highlight its arts and educational missions, ensuring that both aspects are visible and appealing to potential funders.
2. **Internal Collaboration and Self-Reflection:** FSF should foster greater internal collaboration and self-reflection among its staff. Encouraging employees to understand and align their individual values with the organization's mission can help reduce internal tensions and create a more cohesive identity.
3. **Strategic Networking and Partnerships:** Building strategic partnerships with other NPOs and funding organizations that share similar values can enhance FSF's funding opportunities. Networking with peer organizations can also provide valuable insights and support for navigating the philanthropic landscape.
4. **Advocacy for Trust-Based Philanthropy:** FSF should actively advocate for trust-based philanthropy within the funding community. By highlighting the benefits of this approach, FSF can help shift philanthropic practices towards more supportive and sustainable funding models.

Conclusion

Full Spectrum Features operates within a complex philanthropic environment that requires careful navigation of its dual identity as an arts and educational organization. By strategically

managing its self-presentation and advocating for more supportive funding practices, FSF can enhance its ability to secure the necessary resources to fulfill its mission. This study underscores the importance of internal coherence and strategic flexibility in the face of external funding challenges, offering valuable insights for other NPOs facing similar issues.