



The  
Philanthropic  
Initiative

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# Creative County Initiative Year 6 Evaluation Report

*December 5, 2022*

# Executive Summary

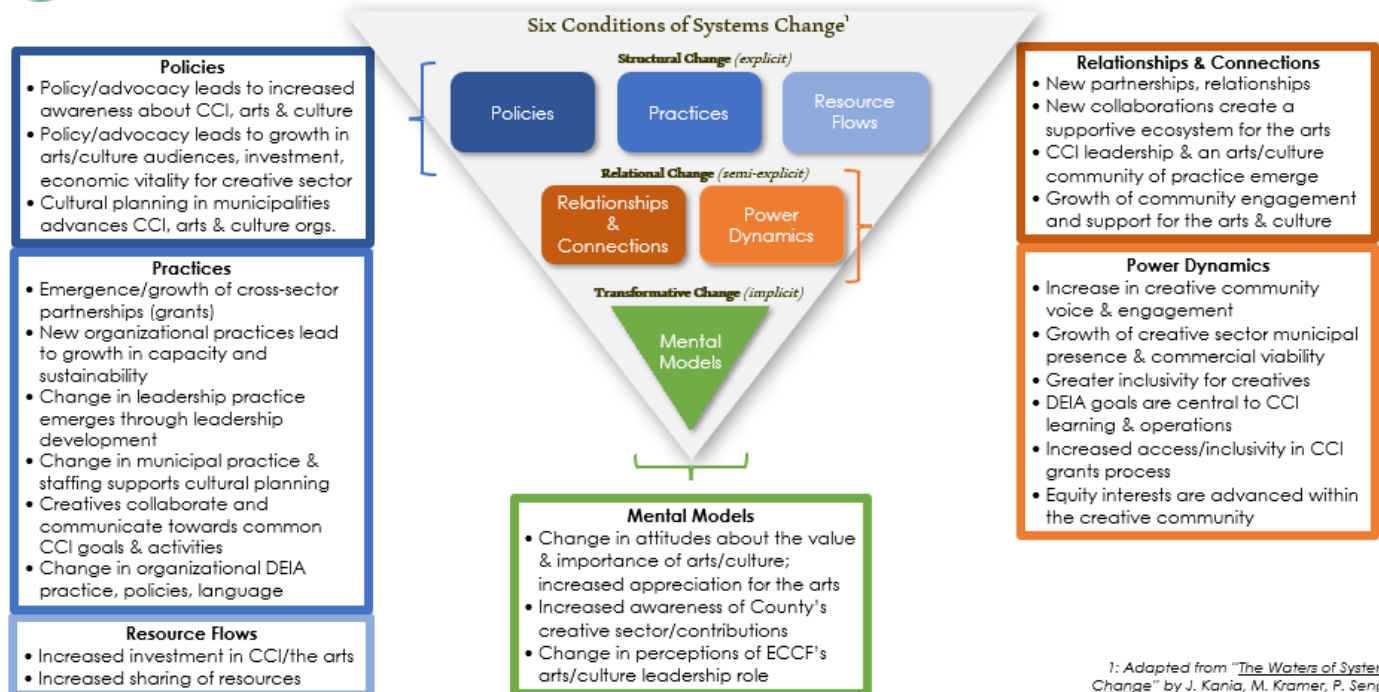
This report summarizes a novel approach to implementing and evaluating systems change through the Creative County Initiative (CCI), a countywide systems change effort and program of the Essex County Community Foundation (ECCF) in partnership with the Barr Foundation. In this evaluation, conducted by The Philanthropic Initiative (TPI), we examine systems changes implemented in CCI through three levers: structural change, relational change, and transformative change. Through the lens of systems change, we examine CCI’s progress over the past six years.

Building on key evaluation and systems change resources, including Kania et al.’s *The Waters of Systems Change*, the evaluation framework and plan for CCI addresses **six conditions of systems change: policies, practices, and resource flows (“structural change”); relationships, connections, and power dynamics (“relational change”); and mental models (“transformative change”).** A focus on the six conditions is critical to understanding the process of systems change occurring in CCI and is a new framework for systems evaluation. According to ECCF’s theory of change, the six conditions must be addressed together to effectively achieve systems change. This report summarizes progress to date in desired CCI outcomes examined through the lens of the six conditions of systems change.

## A Visual Framework of Systems Change in Essex County through the Creative County Initiative



### Systems Change Through the Creative County Initiative (CCI)



## CCI Background, Goals, Leadership, and Funding

Since 2018, ECCF has strived to make long-term, meaningful contributions in Essex County through systems philanthropy. In 2017, ECCF conducted a survey and focus groups with Essex County's arts and culture community to gather input on community assets and needs. With community data helping to shape its response, ECCF responded to a Request for Proposals to join the Barr Foundation's new Creative Commonwealth Initiative – a ten-year investment in the arts and culture sector and economy to be organized and led by anchor community foundations. Launched by the Barr Foundation in 2017, Creative Commonwealth seeks to build arts-friendly policies, financial strength, and local networks for arts and culture. It seeks to help the creative sector become more sustainable, equitable, and accessible regionally and statewide. ECCF's proposal was one of five selected from Massachusetts community foundations for the Creative Commonwealth Initiative.

**ECCF's Creative County Initiative (CCI) is Essex County's response to this long-term, regional capacity building opportunity for the region's arts and culture sector.** During CCI's development, Essex County's arts and culture community expressed need for project funding, connection to each other and to business and municipal opportunities, sector identity development, elevation of arts and culture opportunities in the county particularly in underserved communities, definition of an arts and culture value proposition, support for capacity building, and strengthening of the local arts economy and ecosystem. These identified needs became key components of CCI programming.

CCI is a systems change initiative with the following goals:

- Create a regional voice for arts, culture, and creative expression in Essex County
- Promote transformative community and economic development
- Elevate arts and cultural experiences that celebrate diversity, equity, inclusion, and access across communities
- Invest in artists and the creative economy in an environment of rapidly changing demographics
- Celebrate Essex County as a vibrant place to live, work, create and collaborate
- Create an arts and culture ecosystem that is sustainable, equitable, and accessible.

**ECCF/CCI are implementing these goals through a “five C’s” strategy of collaborative partnership grants, convenings, cultural planning, capacity building, and communications.** Infusion of diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) principles into arts and culture organizational practice is a key CCI goal. DEIA principles guide and influence CCI communications, leadership participation, grantmaking, program activities, and outreach to Essex County's numerous and diverse communities of color.

With ECCF serving as CCI's backbone organization, CCI's infrastructure consists of leadership and administrative support provided by ECCF staff and board, a full-time Program Director, and a 25-member volunteer CCI Steering Committee. ECCF staffs and administers all CCI grantmaking, convenings (including Summits and MeetUps), the Steering Committee, and the ChangeMakers leadership development program. ECCF also oversees all CCI capacity building programs, technical assistance, and communications. By engaging and recruiting local arts and culture leaders through these activities into CCI, ECCF is expanding and diversifying CCI's human infrastructure. Together with partners, ECCF is building the foundation for effective systems change by forging cross-sector

relationships; building organizational and leadership capacity; convening/creating space for conversations, planning, promotion, and prioritization of arts and culture; fostering a countywide arts and culture network and leadership group; and by staffing and/or resourcing all the above collaborative infrastructure.

In its role as program lead, ECCF also supports CCI fundraising and resource development. ECCF receives CCI funding from the Barr Foundation (a commitment of \$3.1 million over ten years). ECCF must also generate matching gifts and awards to supplement Barr Foundation funding. ECCF has raised \$856,000 for CCI to date; \$400,000 additional must be raised before CCI ends in 2026. Thus, ECCF plays multiple roles as CCI funder, program office, and fiscal agent.

Essex County has a long history of a vibrant arts and culture heritage dating back to its pre-Colonial indigenous communities. Through CCI, ECCF intends to actively lead, support, and engage this community along with municipal and business partners, funders, and the public to strengthen the region's arts and culture economy, visibility, and degree of community engagement over a ten-year period. **ECCF's vision for CCI is an Essex County with a strong, creative ecosystem that is sustainable, equitable, and accessible.** Background on CCI and ECCF's systems philanthropy is addressed in Part I of this report. Additional program overview information is provided in Part II.

In Part III, ECCF's collaborative systems change model and roles in CCI are described for in-depth information on how ECCF approaches systems philanthropy and CCI. Part IV outlines methods and data sources of this evaluation, including a program logic model and visual framework of how systems change is happening in Essex County through CCI. Desired outcomes of CCI are summarized in the CCI Logic Model (shown on page 20). Progress toward these outcomes is summarized in Part V through the lens of systems philanthropy. This report describes how CCI is working to build capacity to support arts and culture at the county and local levels, the impact of these activities in CCI's first six years (CCI's Pilot phase, 2017-2109, and Growth and Change phase, 2020-2022), and recommendations for CCI's remaining four years (Sustainability phase, 2023-2026).

### Impact and Systems Change Occurring in Each CCI Outcome Area

**Overall, CCI and ECCF have made tremendous progress toward CCI's seven planned outcomes.** Areas of greatest impact include visible, demonstrable achievements through CCI collaborative grants (including 49 vibrant public art and place-based projects since 2018), two cohorts of well-trained, well-connected arts and culture leaders (ChangeMakers), extensive sector capacity building and technical assistance, communications enhancing CCI's visibility, integration of arts and culture planning into regional and local municipal planning, and emergence of a creative ecosystem that supports CCI and connects the arts and culture community. In Part V, quotes are provided (following each outcome) to illustrate stakeholder interviewee's observations of how systems change is emerging in CCI and perceptions of these changes. Part V begins with a table summarizing key system change impacts for each outcome (this table also appears following the Executive Summary). Summarized below are noteworthy systems changes that are occurring program wide.

Noteworthy CCI structural systems change includes growth of arts and culture programming and CCI infrastructure, including 49 new arts and culture grant projects funded since 2018, and other changes in policy, practice, and resource flows. Each of the 49 CCI grants introduces new collaborative practice among cross-sector project partners, new arts and culture activities

throughout Essex County, new funding for arts/culture, and growth of supportive infrastructure at the local level. Many of these projects have also influenced municipal policy by increasing the profile, input and role of arts and culture within broader municipal planning and budgeting activity.

Other CCI programs, such as cultural planning, capacity building, the ChangeMakers leadership program, ChangeMakers' projects, and CCI convenings have also introduced a wide range of new collaborative and professional practices among CCI participants and ECCF staff. An example of policy change through CCI stems from ECCF and other Creative Commonwealth Initiative participants' advocacy, media, and information sharing with other funders and state policymakers to help shape arts and culture funding potential through the American Rescue Plan Act and state investment in arts and culture. Changes in resource flows through CCI include a total investment of nearly \$4 million to date in CCI grants, programs, and operations. **Since 2018, ECCF estimates it has resourced over 2,000 organizations and reached over 30,000 individuals through CCI's creative ecosystem, funding, and activities.** CCI funds and resources are also intentionally flowing to new recipients, including artists and communities of color, and BIPOC-led arts and culture organizations.

Noteworthy relational systems change includes new relationships and connections emerging through cross-sector collaborative grants, CCI leadership, and a new creative ecosystem. ECCF and CCI have intentionally created space for the arts and culture sector to get to know one another, share ideas, and collaborate. CCI convenings (including CCI Summits and monthly MeetUps), the ChangeMakers leadership development program, CCI capacity building activities, and other forums create new opportunities for countywide learning, dialogue and collaboration among the arts and culture community, and a growing, vibrant network of participants. Through this network, CCI aims to strengthen and diversify the region's creative ecosystem so that it is sustainable, equitable, and accessible. ECCF has been very adept at leading the relational components of infrastructure growth and regional capacity building to support CCI. Relational capacity is also reinforced by CCI's 25-member Steering Committee providing CCI oversight and leadership.

Noteworthy transformative systems change in CCI includes increase (change) in public, municipal, and other stakeholder attitudes about the role of arts and culture in communities, the value and importance of arts/culture, and increased awareness of the county's creative sector and its contributions. This has occurred through CCI collaborative grant projects, cultural planning activities, communications, and the wide range of new practices and new voices emerging from CCI and the arts and culture sector. Observed changes include perceptions of how much attitudes about arts and culture have changed in Essex County since CCI began. Interviewees reported an average change of 6-7 among CCI stakeholders (on a 7-point scale where a rating of 7 represents a great deal of change in attitudes). Interviewees also noted that attitude change among the arts and culture community and CCI stakeholders is greater than among the public. Within the arts and culture community there is increased collaboration, communication, networking, and sharing of ideas across the sector, countywide. These and many other systems changes are summarized in Part V. ECCF provides funding, leadership, and staff support to implement and promote the wide range of systems and programmatic changes described in this report.

### Stakeholder Reflections

Stakeholder reflections on CCI's impact, challenges, and lessons learned during CCI's first six years are summarized (in Part VI) through analysis of online stakeholder survey and interview findings.

Progress in all areas of CCI activity is explored and views on progress from stakeholders are shared, including many quotes summarizing observations about CCI's most significant impact to date and systems changes resulting from CCI and ECCF's role in CCI over the past six years. Examples include:

- "CCI's impact has been great: People and projects have been elevated, marketing of the arts has been elevated, connections have been made across projects and communities. CCI is inspiring and empowering the arts and culture community."
- "There's an arts and culture ecosystem now that didn't exist before CCI. New relationships and collaborations are happening; the arts and culture community is organized and connected."
- "CCI is manufacturing quality of life and improving it. It's about building community, place identity, and people having fun. Joy is what CCI creates."
- "CCI changes the narrative around arts and culture: It's not about individual artists; it's not academic; it's about improving quality of life."
- "Thanks to the ECCF team for creating bespoke, impactful and catalytic interventions, systems of support, and infrastructure that will make arts and creativity sustainable, equitable, and accessible for all."

A poll conducted at the 2022 CCI Summit (with 164 respondents) indicated high ratings of CCI's impact on the arts and culture community in Essex County. Respondents rated CCI's overall impact on arts and culture at 4.1 on a 5-point scale (where 5 is a high level of impact). Respondents were particularly impressed with CCI's work in fostering the development of a strong arts and culture ecosystem (a rating of 4.3), and CCI's role in connecting people and resources (also a rating of 4.3). Following the 2022 Summit, a feedback survey was completed by 51 CCI stakeholders. Survey findings revealed a high degree of satisfaction with CCI's programming (a rating of 6.1 on a 7-point scale, where 7 is highly satisfied). Respondents also strongly agreed (a rating of 6.5 on a 7-point scale) that ECCF functions as a community advocate and leader in advancing arts and culture in Essex County.

Part VI also addresses challenges identified by CCI stakeholders. Examples include:

- How do we demonstrate and communicate CCI's value, and more broadly, the value of arts and culture in communities?
- DEIA principles are front and center in CCI's vision and programming. How can we continuously improve our equity methodology, our outreach processes, and results?
- With one dedicated FTE, bandwidth for CCI staffing is a challenge. A related challenge is managing expectations around CCI. ECCF staff reflected: how do we "stay in our lane"?

Part VI concludes with CCI lessons learned (identified by CCI stakeholders). Examples include:

- The value of relationships in CCI.
- The value of Barr Foundation's long-term flexible funding, visionary leadership, consulting support, and trust in community foundations as catalytic change agents.
- The value of a systems change framework. It serves as a compass, a methodology for programming, and a framework for communications (and evaluation).
- Learning to advance equity and cultural competency in practice, including how to work with artists and communities of color, and how best to include their input from the beginning.

- Municipal relationships and commitment take time and can be hard to come by. For example, municipal staff turnover can be a challenge for continued CCI partnership.
- ECCF staff shared lessons learned about what ECCF's role in CCI should be going forward.

In Part VII, stakeholders' reflections on ideas for improving CCI are elevated. Many interviewees noted that CCI is doing excellent work. Every respondent also offered at least one recommendation for improving CCI. Recommendations are organized into three categories: Operations Improvements; Improvements Related to DEIA; and CCI Grants and Program Improvements.

Ideas for how CCI might best support the growth of a vibrant arts and culture sector and ecosystem in Essex County are summarized in Part VII. These include recommendations for Sustainability and Operations, and for Fundraising, Outreach and Communications; recommendations for Expanding Business and Municipal Relations; and for Broadening DEIA and Community Outreach. These recommendations present a wide range of opportunities for process and operations improvement, and ideas for sustaining and expanding CCI over the next four years.

### Closing Comments

All the above stakeholder feedback provides valuable input that can help inform a strategic planning process and identify key questions for exploration as CCI enters its final phase focused on sustainability. Key questions for exploration in strategic planning include: What are CCI's goals for the next phase and how can ECCF/CCI best support them? What metrics or milestones can best assess CCI's impact in this next phase? Are there recommended pivots for ECCF or CCI operations? Which CCI programs, practices, goals, and activities should be carried forward? What operating model for CCI is most advantageous for the next phase and long term? Should ECCF's goal be to raise an arts and culture endowment? What fundraising and communications strategies best facilitate next steps? How can CCI expand economically viable partnerships with county businesses and municipalities? How might CCI go deeper in communities and reach even more Essex County communities in the next four years? These and other shared questions can help guide work and planning for CCI's next phase and inform operations and outreach over the next four years.

Looking ahead, planning for, and achieving CCI's sustainability will be a primary focus. Evaluating, scaling, and expanding successful programs and activities from prior years will be another goal. Expansion will need to occur both geographically within the county and demographically to include more artists of color and new communities in CCI grants and opportunities.

In CCI, the role of ECCF in coordinating, co-leading, convening, staffing, and implementing all aspects of CCI operations is impressive. Also fundamental to CCI's success is the Barr Foundation's long-term funding and leadership, including their vision and support of community foundations as agents of arts and culture change, community voice, and connection. Finally, the county's arts and culture community itself has risen - together with CCI - to elevate its voice, presence, talents, professional skills, role in civic planning, and important contributions to place-making, community building, and quality of community life.

Table 1. Highlights of Systems Change Impact During CCI's First Six Years

## Systems Change Impact by CCI Outcome Area

CCI Outcome #1: Regional cross-sector partnerships (public art and creative place-based grant projects) emerge and grow as models					
Policies	Practices	Resource Flows	Relationships & Connections	Power Dynamics	Mental Models
Municipal policies emerge to support and sustain grant projects	New collaborative practices emerge, including integration of arts and culture input and projects into mainstream municipal planning & budgeting	\$675,000 in new ECCF grant funding for public art and creative place-based projects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CCI's collaborative grant cross-sector partnership requirement forges new relationships.</li> <li>Cohort of CCI grantees forms a network for sharing through monthly MeetUps.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Artists' input and influence grows through collaborative grant projects.</li> <li>Arts/culture sector diversity increases; diversity of grant project leadership increases.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Municipal leaders and planners begin to see the arts and culture sector as partners in community building.</li> <li>Arts/culture grantees interact as peers, sharing ideas and information.</li> </ul>
CCI Outcome #2: Cultural planning activities lead to more communities with a cultural plan, a CCI sustainability plan, and economic growth for arts and culture					
Policies	Practices	Resource Flows	Relationships & Connections	Power Dynamics	Mental Models
Regional and local municipal policies emerge to support and sustain cultural planning activity with sustained input from the arts/culture sector.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A regional sustainability plan emerges; local plans emerge in 8 towns.</li> <li>Cultural plans sustain local arts activity through sector input, integration with broader municipal planning, and public funding.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New area of investment: ECCF funds cultural planning activities.</li> <li>Regional and municipal financial and in-kind support for arts/culture planning and activities also grows.</li> <li>New/reinforced investment in cultural planning staff.</li> </ul>	<p>Cultural planning forges new working relationships among artists and municipal planners.</p> <p>Municipalities share cultural plans and strategies with other towns/municipalities.</p>	Artists' input and influence grows through cultural planning activities, increased sector input and visibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Municipal leaders and planners begin to see the arts and culture sector as partners in community building.</li> <li>Towns share cultural plans and funding strategies with other municipalities.</li> </ul>
CCI Outcome #3: Strong leadership development and capacity building programs emerge and increase arts capacity					
Policies	Practices	Resource Flows	Relationships & Connections	Power Dynamics	Mental Models
	Each of CCI's 3 capacity building programs advances arts/culture sector learning and professional practice.	New area of investment: ECCF funds arts/culture capacity building, technical support, and leadership programs.	Program participants have formed new relationships and networks for sharing. Artists are reaching out to one another.	Arts/culture sector and its leaders gain new knowledge, professional skills, inclusion in decision making, and a learning community (network).	<p>Growth of sector leadership emerges.</p> <p>Increased diversity of sector leadership emerges.</p>



CCI Outcome #4: Increase in public awareness of the arts through greater visibility; greater value and focus on arts/culture					
Policies	Practices	Resource Flows	Relationships & Connections	Power Dynamics	Mental Models
	CCI Summits, website, media, and communications increase CCI's visibility and public participation in CCI events.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Arts/culture promotion is a new area of ECCF investment.</li> <li>Stakeholders report growth of arts/culture sector revenues emerging through increased public patronage, municipal and business support.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CCI communications raise public and municipal awareness of the role arts and culture can play in civic life.</li> <li>CreativeCounty.org creates a CCI and sector platform where events, ideas, and best practice can be showcased.</li> </ul>	Increased visibility raises the profile of the arts and culture community.	CCI communications change public and stakeholder awareness, attitudes, and behaviors, increasing the value of arts and culture in Essex County.
CCI Outcome #5: Organizational structure for a sustainable creative ecosystem emerges through a regional strategy					
Policies	Practices	Resource Flows	Relationships & Connections	Power Dynamics	Mental Models
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New creative ecosystem structures created include CCI convenings, grants and capacity building programs, ECCF staff support, Steering Committee, and communications.</li> <li>ECCF implements new philanthropy practices to support CCI and its emerging ecosystem.</li> <li>Through this ecosystem, ECCF and the arts/culture sector now engage in a range of new practices &amp; activities.</li> </ul>	CCI's creative ecosystem is a new area of financial investment and staff support for ECCF.	Growth of relationships and connections within the arts and culture community and across sectors are occurring through participation in CCI's creative ecosystem. These new connections lead to information sharing, new opportunities, and collaboration among the arts and culture community in Essex County.	Arts and culture peer networks are growing, ecosystem participants are increasingly diverse, and sector leaders are emerging from the ecosystem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New forms of interaction and collaboration are changing attitudes and behaviors among the arts/culture community.</li> <li>The sector's rising profile attracts new awareness, attention and respect from municipal leaders, the public, the funder community, and other sectors.</li> </ul>
CCI Outcome #6: Steady growth of cross-sector investment in CCI; raise a minimum of \$2 million for CCI					
Policies	Practices	Resource Flows	Relationships & Connections	Power Dynamics	Mental Models
CCI's policy as funding catalyzer has increased and diversified investment in arts and culture.	Catalyzed fundraising for arts/culture activity by ECCF and all CCI grantees is new practice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Investment in CCI has exceeded ECCF's goal of \$2 million.</li> <li>Funding sources are diversifying over time.</li> </ul>	Investment practice reinforces donors and funders connection and commitment to arts and culture.	Increased investment and resources elevate arts and culture sector roles, activity, and visibility.	The sector's rising profile attracts new awareness, attention, investment, and recognition.

**CCI Outcome #7: DEIA principles are infused into CCI and into arts and culture organizations' policies, language, and practice**

Policies	Practices	Resource Flows	Relationships & Connections	Power Dynamics	Mental Models
<p>DEIA policy change is a key CCI goal and activity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All CCI grants, programs &amp; activities target inclusion of BIPOC artists and communities.</li> <li>• ECCF policies and practice to advance DEIA also increase ECCF's engagement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CCI grant funding and resources are targeted to artists and communities of color.</li> <li>• More funding, resources and opportunities are intentionally flowing to these constituents.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The county's creative ecosystem is becoming more diverse.</li> <li>• New voices are emerging, and new communities are now part of the ecosystem.</li> </ul>	<p>Power dynamics are changing as artists and communities of color are increasingly seen, heard, and supported at CCI events and in the county's creative ecosystem.</p>	<p>With increased BIPOC visibility and changing power dynamics comes a greater sense of belonging among BIPOC artists/communities, and greater connection to CCI, the creative ecosystem, and to one another.</p>