

# Our Stories, Our Selves

A3P: The African American Arts Project

*A Study of African American  
Young Adult Arts Participation*

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The artistic history of Africans in America spans hundreds of years, from the first Africans who brought their homelands' cultural traditions across the Atlantic, to the young Black pioneers of the hip-hop generation. Because of this far-reaching scope, the programs PITT ARTS created with its partners for the African American Arts Project (A3P) were equally varied: Afro-Brazilian Capoeira; conversations with contemporary Black filmmakers; on-campus dance performances celebrating African American women dancers; smooth modern and eclectic Afro-Cuban jazz; contemporary Black painters, quilters, and sculptors; hip-hop turntablists and many spoken word artists; performances from Harlem Renaissance musicals; and the art of August Wilson—these are only a sampling of the 21 programs that students experienced.

**University of Pittsburgh students experienced these arts through interactions with talented artists and educators, who shared their knowledge with friendliness, directness, thoughtfulness, and generosity.** Together they talked about the influence of urban culture upon pop culture; the history of jazz; the works of August Wilson; and the world of Afro-Caribbean drumming. Students also created African drums and adinkra quilt patterns, participated in spoken word, drew self-portraits, and did African dances.

In the course of determining A3P programs, PITT ARTS often asked: what exactly construes an African American art event; or, where lies the “Blackness” in each event? What is the core element that defines it as such? Is it the subject matter of the art, exploring African American history or culture? Or perhaps in the Black identity of the performers, regardless of the art being presented? Or is it in the identity and mission of the presenting organization? This question can be extended to what defines an African American arts organization, or to cast the cultural net further, what defines a “diversity” art event, or how do arts organizations garner the sought-after diverse audiences?

### **PITT ARTS AND THE ORIGINS OF A3P**

Since 2000, PITT ARTS has initiated key research projects into young adult arts participation, catalyzed by its commitment to working with the young adult community at the University of Pittsburgh. The Heinz Endowments supported two consecutive two-year grant projects that allowed PITT ARTS to develop specialized arts programming with deeper opportunities for student learning around the arts. This funding also has facilitated the creation of a body of research, including the monographs *A Study of Young Adult Arts Participation* and *Young Audiences and the Arts* that permits PITT ARTS to make clear claims about what young adults want from their arts experiences, share that information with the greater Pittsburgh arts community, and incorporate those data into programming practices. It was during these four years of research that the concept for the African American Arts Project, also known as A3P, originated.

During the four years of Young Adult Arts Participation Initiative (YAAPI) programming and research, PITT ARTS staff observed that record numbers of African Americans participated in programs which explored African American culture. It became clear that further investigation was needed in order to determine what differences, if any, existed between the arts participation patterns, barriers, impetuses, and needs of African American and White students. In a 2002 University of Pittsburgh Campus Climate study conducted by the Women's Studies Department, researchers found that African American male students were the least satisfied with their experiences on campus (1). Through the African American Arts Project, PITT ARTS intended to examine the sources of this dissatisfaction, explore factors that positively influence students to participate in the arts, and



Clark Jackson and Inga Ballard  
in Pittsburgh Public Theater's  
production of *Yellowman*.

PHOTO BY RIC EVANS

enhance the quality of all African American students' Pitt experiences through the arts. For the project, it also seemed significant to understand and more deeply serve an important segment of Pitt's student demographic: the 9% population of African American undergraduate students. This focus, while not entirely new to PITT ARTS, constituted an approach that allowed extended and in-depth programming, and opportunities to truly investigate the cultural interests African American students have and the barriers which discourage them from fully participating in the arts.

The primary goals of the African American Arts Project were to facilitate fully enriched opportunities for African American students to engage in the African American arts of Pittsburgh; enlist greater numbers of the African American student population at the University of Pittsburgh in the arts in an effort to deepen and enrich the quality of their experiences at Pitt; gather data about what inclines African American students to participate in the arts, and to share those data with the arts community; aid African American arts organizations in their ongoing audience development efforts; and diversify audiences at White arts organizations.

Modeled after PITT ARTS' Free Arts Encounters programs, the African American Arts Project partnered with various African American and other arts organizations to create programs for students using the socio-educational program model developed during PITT ARTS' first three years and tested and refined through the Heinz Endowments-funded Young Adults Arts Participation Initiative. During the subsequent two years of A3P research, partners collaboratively created with PITT ARTS 21 programs, each of them featuring for students free tickets, free transportation to performances or gallery exhibitions, free on-site catered receptions or outings to local restaurants, as well as outstanding opportunities to meet the creative minds behind the art: such as directors, casts, curators, artists, and educators. All elements of the A3P program—art performance, education, and refreshments—were carefully crafted so that they complemented one another to create multiple “entry and celebration” points. For example, one program explored the culture of the Caribbean through a tour of contemporary Cuban art, a lecture/demonstration of Afro-Caribbean drums, a drum-making workshop, and Caribbean food. Cultural immersion arts experiences of this type were mined during the work of the original YAAPI project, and were utilized whenever appropriate and possible during the A3P programs so that students could deepen the level of cultural learning and enrichment in their arts encounters.

The most important initial phase of the project was to identify potential partners among local African American and White arts organizations. PITT ARTS selected organizations based on their capacity to program with PITT ARTS, the timing of their seasons, and their rates of success with PITT ARTS, not only in terms of African American student participation, but also in the educational value that they offered participants. During A3P's two years, PITT ARTS worked with eight core arts organizations: an organization dedicated to presenting multicultural urban arts, an African

American theatre company, a White contemporary theater organization, a large organization presenting nationally known performers, a jazz series set by a large minority-directed organization, an Afro-Brazilian dance company, a contemporary African American dance company, and a large African American arts organization presenting both performing and visual arts.

In addition to the eight core arts organizations which constituted A3P's primary partners, A3P was nimble enough to implement one-time-only programs with a number of arts organizations: a large performing arts organization, an African and an African American dance company, a contemporary arts center, an international art museum, and a university art gallery.

PITT ARTS also felt it important that an African American consultant coordinate the African American Arts Project, with the oversight of the PITT ARTS Director. This consultant had multiple connections within the Pittsburgh arts community with a particular focus on African American arts, and was able to bring these pre-existing relationships to bear for this project.

## ON THE SUBJECT OF RACE

By its very nature, the African American Arts Project dealt with issues of race: in the content of programs; in the interactions among the students; in the relationships among PITT ARTS and its partners; and in the dialogues between the students and the artists and educators at A3P organizations. This project was an incredible opportunity for all those involved to examine the ways in which race and culture impact the creation of, community collaboration for, and participation in the arts. The willingness of all to step into the somewhat murky, sometimes raw, but always thought-provoking waters of cross-racial relations, with a spirit of open communication, collaboration, learning, and patience, was a major component to A3P's success.

As PITT ARTS also discovered, language was both a useful tool for connecting with people, and a complex maze of racial identity and power issues. For the purposes of this monograph, PITT ARTS uses the following terms to refer to the art, students, and groups involved in A3P:

- :: "*African American student/young adult*" and "*Black student/young adult*" are used interchangeably to refer to those University of Pittsburgh students of African descent, whether born in the United States, or a student from abroad.
- :: "*African American/Black arts organizations*" indicates arts groups whose main audience and core leadership are African American, or whose mission and programs are of particular interest to or reflective of the African American community.
- :: "*Afro-centric*," "*African American*," or "*Black*" art is art that examines and celebrates the arts of the African Diaspora.

:: "*Non-Black students*" refer to the mix of mostly White, and then in smaller numbers, Asian, Hispanic, and Latino students who attended A3P programs.

:: "*White arts organizations*" refers to arts organizations who, although are welcoming to and actively seeking diverse audiences, have traditionally garnered a majority White audience and employ a primarily White core leadership.

Although these definitions may be imperfect at best, PITT ARTS hopes and invites all members of the arts community to be involved in the ongoing conversations about these labels, what they have historically meant, and how to create new, more accurate and truthful ones.

## EARLY METHODOLOGY AND EXPLORATION

PITT ARTS' initial observation during the YAAPI program was that African American students would be more inclined to participate in arts events that actively explored the African American experience, that were presented in a warm, exciting, and welcoming environment, and that were clearly marketed as such. In order to confirm these ideas, PITT ARTS employed several means to discover African American students' cultural needs, values, interests, impetuses and barriers to participation, and patterns of consumption. After each program, students rated their experiences using Lickert scale surveys created for the YAAPI grant and modified for A3P. These surveys were invaluable in providing immediate program feedback, which PITT ARTS shared with its partners and used to create programs which fit more closely with Black students' needs.

PITT ARTS conducted a focus group with seven African American students at the beginning of the project to take the pulse of Black students' cultural experiences. The seven Black women who participated—despite strong marketing efforts, no men volunteered—had attended many cultural events, were leaders in African American student groups, ranged from freshmen to seniors, came from major cities and small towns, and possessed a deep interest in involving more African American students in the arts.

This focus group was an important touchstone in developing A3P programming because it was not only a critical first step in confirming and developing PITT ARTS' thinking around African American programs, but allowed PITT ARTS to understand the emotional, social, and logistical needs African American students have around cultural events. Students repeatedly stated that they actively looked for events exploring their cultural experiences, which gave PITT ARTS confidence in the plan to create primarily Afro-centric programs. From emphasizing the importance of a warm, exciting, and educational atmosphere, and the crucial role Black student groups could

play in marketing A3P events; to explaining the emotional, social, and spiritual roles arts play in their lives, these students were powerful resources to us. PITT ARTS then proceeded to program with the best definition it could create: that an African American art event celebrates, explores, and honors the history, language, cultural traditions, and current innovations that are unique to people of African descent—regardless of the presenting organization’s identity or participants.

PITT ARTS also shared this videotaped dialogue with A3P partner organizations, discussing new and ongoing strategies to connect with and create positive experiences for Black young adult audiences. One partner made a key insight which also informed the program planning: a widely diverse population of students of African descent exists at Pitt. African Americans, Haitians, Dominicans, and Caribbeans; Black Greeks, artists, honor students, and engineers; hip hop aficionados and lovers of country music. Because no single profile of an “African American Pitt student” existed, A3P programs had to consider and meet the needs of all. Another partner aptly noted that the arts community needed to develop more programs that feature, explore, and celebrate the African Diasporic arts.

One early concern was how to determine which students who signed up for A3P programs were African American. The solution was adding a race identifier to the PITT ARTS program sign-in page. This information was then visible to PITT ARTS when it selected students to participate in programs. As PITT ARTS observed the names and program attendance histories of students on the sign-up list, it became apparent that many of the same African American students were signing up for A3P programs, with few new attendees—a great deal of frequency, with not as much reach. With careful thought and planning, PITT ARTS selected as many African American students as possible, mindful to create a mix between Black and non-Black students, repeaters and first-timers, and women and men.

## WHAT AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS WANT IN THEIR ARTS EXPERIENCES

**The key to African American students’ art participation is to create opportunities for them to encounter the arts specific to their experience, in a welcoming environment that fully acknowledges and celebrates the depth of the African American experience.** African American young adults want to experience art that is a reflection of themselves as African Americans, art that either reveals something new and interesting about the Black experience or reaffirms for these students what it means to be an African American. The beauty, suffering, intelligence, humor, struggle, and achievements—all of it is important to these students. As one African American student explained, art is an avenue for African Americans to become connected



A student viewing artwork by New York artist Cheryl Riley from *Color: Ten African American Artists* at the Society for Contemporary Craft.

PHOTO BY SARAH E.J. WILLIAMS

with and better understand themselves, their experiences, their past, and ancestors; and that artists fill in the empty spaces of knowledge missing from African American history because they have the imagination to do so. Art as a tool for cultural connection, particularly with a population whose history has been systematically ignored or obliterated, is a profound concept.

During the student focus group, one student mentioned that she attended a predominantly White high school and learned mainly about Western/European civilization. Another focus group student sometimes did not appreciate art in elementary and high school because it did not connect with her identity as a young Black female: “I am a 20 year-old African American female. Where do I fit in?” As a result, both of these students looked for cultural experiences that mirrored their own history. These early childhood and adolescent interactions with the arts may affect African American young adults’ interactions with the arts, depending upon the racial make-up of the school and community, the wealth of arts in the community, and the value of the arts their elders and parents place upon them.

According to student surveys, African American young adults attend art events for the same primary reasons, and at similar percentages, as non-Blacks: to do something fun (#1) or to try something new (#2), because they are interested in particular programs (#3), or because they want to spend time with a friend or date (#4). This indicates that Black and non-Black students are not necessarily so different in their impetus for attendance; however, the arts serve a need for the African American student that is distinct and additional to non-Blacks.

**This distinct interest in Afro-centered programming demonstrated itself in the swell of African American attendance at PITT ARTS events. Over the past two years, 963 students participated in 21 A3P programs, 426 of them African American—indicating a rate of 44.2% Black student participation. This figure, which includes first-time participants as well as repeaters, is significant considering that the pre-A3P baseline average of African American students engaging in PITT ARTS programs was a mere 8–10%. This 8–10% is comparable to the 8.1% rate of arts participation by African American adults according to the National Endowment for the Arts’ 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (14). The dramatic increase in attendance in arts programs by African American students suggests that the interest in such programming articulates a palpable need.**

As for what types of arts programs resound with African American students, when PITT ARTS asked students to rank their top five arts events, the differences between African American and non-Black students’ interests are striking:

<b>A3P: African American Students</b>	<b>A3P: Non-Black Students</b>	<b>PITT ARTS General Survey Results 2005–2006</b>
1. Theatre	1. Music Event or Concert	1. Music Event or Concert
2. Art Gallery or Museum	2. Art Gallery or Museum	2. Art Gallery or Museum
3. Poetry/Spoken Word	3. Independent Film	3. Independent Film
4. Music Event/Concert	4. Theatre	4. Theatre
5. Ballet/Dance	5. Spoken Word/Poetry	5. Musical

While the responses from A3P non-Black students and the general PITT ARTS pool nearly are nearly identical, Black students are clearly interested in other permutations of arts events.

Art that combines these multiple genres or disciplines into one program clearly resounds with African American students. Several programs created by a multicultural, urban arts organization fused spoken word, theatre, hip hop, artist dialogues, live art-making and live music into single events revolving around a particular theme. An on-campus version of this event, celebrating the work of writers August Wilson and Rob Penny, drew over 80 students. The success of these programs reveals that African American students are interested in experiencing art that explores multiple cultures, genres, and disciplines in a unique and experimental manner.

**Regardless of the genre or how they are combined, Black students respond most strongly to art in which they can be deeply engaged on multiple levels—culturally, emotionally, intellectually, historically, and socially.** Particularly high-praised programs were ones in which students either directly participated in their own experience or felt as if they were part of the experience. For example, students read their own poetry at open mike sessions, and danced and drummed on stage at several dance performances. In other cases, the artists’ warmth, positive energy, and interaction with the audience made African American students feel welcome. This “call and response”—a transmission of energy and knowledge from artist to audience and back again—is a key element of African American arts. More intimate venues, or alternative venues, such as local coffee shops, jazz clubs, and smoke-free clubs, also garnered high praise from students in increasing their comfort.

It is important to note, however, that the inclusion of an African American artist in a traditionally White art form may not necessarily transform the event into an event that engages African American culture or African American audiences. For example, a program featuring African American classical pianist André Watts performing Mozart drew the lowest percentage of Black students: a mere 7%. However, similar concerts featuring larger-name performers such as Bobby McFerrin, or concerts at which the symphony played Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald’s music, drew stronger African American attendance.

PITT ARTS also found that African American men and women attend arts events at similar percentages as non-Blacks: 81% women, 19% men for African Americans; vs. 70% women and 30% men for non-Blacks. The 11% difference in the male/female attendance ratio is significant and suggests that more work needs to be done to engage African American male students in the arts. PITT ARTS' analysis of the Campus Climate Study of 2002 flagged this very group as deserving focus for creating significant engagement. PITT ARTS persists in this effort.

Once university students are engaged in the arts, it is always hoped that they will continue to attend arts events after graduation. 96% of Black students stated in post-program surveys that they would either definitely or potentially patronize the arts after leaving the University, compared with 99% of non-Black students. These similar findings are significant because they indicate that African American young adults are solidly committed to experiencing art independently, and value the arts enough to continue patronizing them after graduation at nearly the same rates as non-Black students. The differential of 3% is worth consideration, however, in that it should drive concerns about how we could do more for African American students to cement their loyalty to the arts at the higher levels that non-Black students demonstrate.

## WHAT KEEPS THEM FROM PARTICIPATING

As with most college students, African American young adults are quite busy individuals, balancing commitments to school, work, volunteerism, and student clubs at the same intense levels as non-Blacks. It is therefore not surprising that studying, time conflicts, and money are the same top three significant arts participation barriers for Black and non-Black students. However, A3P students are 4% busier with their extra-curricular involvement and activities than their non-A3P counterparts who participate through PITT ARTS. Lack of knowledge of events, and lack of someone to attend with also were ranked high on this list.

Interestingly, when asked how they prefer to spend their leisure time, African American students ranked attending an art event as their third choice; watching TV and renting movies taking the top two spots. Compared with the number-one ranking of cultural events among non-Black students, a clear difference appears between the interests in arts events between Black and non-Black students. PITT ARTS asked African American students why TV/movies ranked above arts, and they replied that time and ease of access were the critical reasons: they were easier to access, did not usually require pre-planning (such as buying tickets, gathering friends, or planning outfits), could be experienced indoors regardless of weather, and were considered cheaper than attending arts events. One student mentioned that if she could experience arts through



Two students making art at the Society for Contemporary Craft.

PHOTO BY SARAH E.J. WILLIAMS

TV and films, she would do so “in a heartbeat.” Further research is needed to determine the rates at which African American young adults consume arts through the media.

One issue raised in the focus group was that Black students sometimes feel awkward or uneasy going to White art events alone. For example, one African American student who participated in the focus group had attended a performance by Laurie Anderson, a White conceptual artist. Although she enjoyed the show, she was uncomfortable because she was one of the only Black faces there, and felt she had to “flip to [her] ‘light-skinned’ side.” Another student in the focus group responded when asked about this isolation, “You feel like you’re the art exhibit.” This sense of social and racial isolation can be significant for African American students who are interested in art forms that have been traditionally attended by mostly-white audiences, such as the symphony, opera, or contemporary art—especially when the student is one of the few African Americans attending.

However, African American students placed this feeling of being out of place at art events dead last among their barriers to participation; less than one percent cited this reason. This may indicate either that the experiences of social isolation at art events occur simply less frequently than first thought, or that the events which African American students frequent—mainly Afro-centered events—are warmer and welcoming to Black students, thus eliminating the discomfort.

Another significant barrier to African American arts participation is racist/prejudiced behavior at arts organizations, committed either by staff or by fellow visitors. In one instance recounted to PITT ARTS, a large group of African American students attending a play at a local White theater were treated disrespectfully by the staff, who was displeased with the group’s exuberant behavior while waiting for their bus. Other instances of prejudiced behavior by visitors that African American students recalled included:

- :: One student and a Black male friend visited an arboretum. One visitor assumed that the Black male student worked for the arboretum, and was told to help carry some materials. The focus group student has returned to the arboretum since this event.
- :: At an exhibition of lynching photography at a White art museum, another student was disturbed by a visitor who laughed and danced to a recording of *Strange Fruit*, a song about lynching. The student has not returned to the museum since this incident.

**When arts organizations are seeking to work successfully with African American audiences, their staff must be adequately trained in the importance of African American arts and exhibit the cultural awareness needed to engage audiences in this art.** While the actions and behaviors of visitors are uncontrollable by exhibitors or presenters, arts organizations can continue to make ongoing efforts to equally sensitize their patrons to this art using how art is presented and contextualized in order to reduce incidences of this nature.

## GETTING IT RIGHT: EDUCATION AND ENGAGEMENT

African American students also greatly value the opportunity to gain deeper insights on the art through direct connections with the artists themselves, particularly with visual art exhibitions, where the meaning of the work may not be readily apparent. This dovetails perfectly with overall PITT ARTS programs, as students clearly have expressed excitement and have experienced real depth in their arts encounters when meeting with world class soloists, famous opera stars, or artists, arts leaders, artistic directors, etc.

**When creating educational programs for African American young adults, whether they are artist talks, pre-show lectures, creative workshops, or even educational essays for the programs, all arts organizations, particularly White groups, must always remember their audience.** African American students absolutely *do not* want to be talked down to by the artists/educators; they want to talk *with* these artists, and engage them in stimulating interaction about the work. Most importantly, artists/educators must balance the need to be culturally aware and sensitive of their audience while speaking directly and forthrightly about the struggles and pain African Americans experienced. African American students, through their own family histories, personal experiences, or interests in Africana Studies, know this history inside and out. Any mistakes in information or unintentional sugarcoating, will not sit well with students.

One example of this occurred at a musical theatre event by one of PITT ARTS’ White theatre partners. Students attended a pre-show talk with the Director of Education, who traced the thread of jazz from its African origins through American slavery to the Great Migration. Some students, both Black and non-Black, found the talk very informative, interesting, and helpful. In his well-meaning attempts to be sensitive to his audience (as a middle-aged White male speaking to a group of African American young adults), however, he was *too* sensitive, unintentionally glossing over the emotional and historical importance of slavery by using language more appropriate for younger audiences, which many African American students did not appreciate.

The staff at this theatre was very open and willing to learn why students had reacted in a negative fashion, took both the students’ and PITT ARTS concerns seriously, and was eager to work with PITT ARTS to brainstorm future approaches to working with African American audiences. The following artist talk at that theatre was much more open, student-driven, and engaging than the previous one, and was called by the Director of Education, “the best talk-back that he had ever been a part of at the theatre.”

This valuable misunderstanding underscores the need for educational components of African American programming to strongly celebrate the achievements of African Americans as well as honestly and forthrightly acknowledge the terrible struggles Blacks faced. In this way African American students can feel their heritage is being validated and recognized, and feel

comfortable and embraced at arts and cultural events. This issue is essential for White organizations to consider as they continue to welcome, educate, and build diverse audiences.

## **CREATING CONNECTIONS: HOW TO REACH AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDENTS**

The most vital step in the A3P efforts to engage Black students in the arts was to forge strong relationships with African American student leaders. All other marketing strategies were built upon these core relationships. Multiple Black students, alumni, and leaders noted the important roles Black student groups play: providers of connection with other students, academic and emotional support, and importantly, exploration of African heritage.

According to 2004–2006 A3P student surveys, the top five ways in which African American young adults learn about art and cultural events are:

1. Email Blasts (18.4%)
2. Word of Mouth (15.4%)
3. Flyer/poster (14.6%)
4. *Pitt News*, a University of Pittsburgh student newspaper (14.3%)
5. Friend (9.6%)

Email blasts are a very effective marketing tool for reaching African American students. These blasts are simple, convenient, and direct ways that African American students learn about art events and these blasts are just as simple, free, and efficient for the sponsoring organization. PITT ARTS connected with Black student organizations' Presidents, Vice-Presidents, and most importantly the Membership/Marketing Chairs—those who send email communications to their constituents—allowing access to literally hundreds of African American students from over a dozen different Black student groups. These groups became a funnel for A3P event information, which they then forwarded to their email distribution lists. These leaders were able to use their status and connections in the Black student community to leverage interest in A3P programs. In addition to PITT ARTS' own email blasts, African American students listed blasts from African American student groups, emails from other arts organizations, and emails from independent African American or other art websites, such as SoulPitt.com or ThisIsHappening.com.

Word-of-mouth, flyer/poster, and friend marketing went through a student intern, a student marketing street team, and a strong flyering campaign. This intern informed fellow Black students about A3P programs via emails to a D-list of African American students, flyering, and postings on an online social networking site. This student also coordinated a special marketing street

team of students who had attended A3P programs who could talk with people about A3P programs and hand out flyers. Various professors and university departments such as Africana Studies were targeted to market A3P programs, and also advertised A3P and Afro-centric programs through a monthly magazine published by one of the Black student groups. **By connecting with advisors and membership in student groups for email campaigns, establishing a student flyering/word-of-mouth street team, and continuing with traditional student newspaper advertising, arts organizations can create multiple points of access between their groups and the African American young adult audiences they seek.**

## **ENERGIZING THE MARKETING LANGUAGE**

**African American students want to know upon first glance about the energy of the art, and whether or not this event will speak to them as African Americans.** In order to reach African American students to attend programs, particularly those programs featuring possibly unfamiliar artists, PITT ARTS adapted its language in its program marketing emails. Initial A3P emails described the credentials of the artists and did not expressly convey that it would be an Afro-centric event:

### **Monty Alexander/Clark Terry**

Dizzy Gillespie. Quincy Jones. Frank Sinatra. Jazz pianist Monty Alexander has played with all of them. Alexander splices American jazz and classic soul with the reggae of his Jamaican roots, creating a sound that is at once exotic and uplifting. Joining Alexander is National Endowment for the Arts Jazz Master Clark Terry. A musical icon for the great Miles Davis, “Mumbles” be-bopped in the big bands of Duke Ellington and Count Basie. Terry later brought his exuberant, swinging horn playing to *The Tonight Show* as one of the first African American musicians employed in a TV house band. Do not miss this effervescent performance!

This program garnered a mere 7% African American student participation rate. PITT ARTS promptly changed its language to emphasize the actual energy of the experience students would have, and marked all programs as “African American Arts Project Programs.” PITT ARTS also experimented with language to match the event—smooth, funky words for jazz events, a tinge of hip hop slang for spoken word events:

### **Midnight Espresso: Jam Master Jay—An African American Arts Project Program**

“He’s Jam Master Jay, the big beat blaster....” Celebrate the life of this Hip Hop pioneer at this synergy of the arts and nightlife. Savor a delicious free dinner at Ethiopian restaurant Abay, then stroll over to the Shadow Lounge for a pre-talk with local DJ Supa C, famous both for his beats and his



A talk-back session with Paquito D’Rivera and members of his band at Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild’s Music Hall.

PHOTO BY SARAH E.J. WILLIAMS

skills on the turntables. Then join the vibe as Supa C spins the best of Jam Master Jay, Run-DMC, and music from that golden era of Hip Hop. Joining Supa C will be visual artist Anire Mosely, pulling inspiration from Supa C’s beats to create art live in front of you! The open mic before the show will also be available for poets as well as emcees, so bring your poetry if you wish!

African American attendance rates at A3P programs immediately increased as a result of this new model. At this Midnight Espresso program, the first program that was marketed in this new format, 70% of the participants were African American. This new approach to “experience-based marketing” was critical when advertising programs for events such as jazz concerts or dance performances, whose artists, despite their critical acclaim, may not be known outside of their respective circles. This strategy was also very useful when marketing cultural events featuring art or artists from previous generations, (e.g. Harlem Renaissance musicals). The exceptions to this were artists who are celebrated in their fields and known in the larger, current popular culture, such as Savion Glover, August Wilson, Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre, and Spike Lee.

## **PARTNER COLLABORATIONS AND OPEN COMMUNICATION**

PITT ARTS’ partners ranged from major arts institutions employing dozens of people to small arts groups with only a handful of staff. Each of these organizations, both African American and White, faced unique audience development, programming, and identity issues, and were able to explore the nature of these issues and those of the larger interaction between race and the arts. These issues would often come to bear in PITT ARTS’ interactions with its partners.

**The key element to PITT ARTS’ collaborations was strong, open, mutually beneficial, racially-aware, and positive communication in all aspects of the relationships.** This spirit of true respect and collaboration is especially critical in relationships between White organizations and African American organizations, particularly when a size differential exists (i.e. a small African American arts organization partnering with a larger White organization, or vice versa). It is important for all parties involved to recognize the mutual benefit of the collaboration, and create a win-win partnership in which each group is recognized as a fully equal and powerful partner.

In order to facilitate these relationships, PITT ARTS developed a Mutual Partner Goals Document, a tool based on a simple Venn diagram which aided PITT ARTS in brainstorming various strategies developing mutual goals for these partnerships. This document stemmed from the Sustainable Strategies report, created during the YAAPI project. Using this tool, PITT ARTS had face-to-face meetings with its partners to outline each side’s specific goals for African American young adult outreach, based upon each organization’s mission statements and strategic development. PITT ARTS and each organization then co-outlined mutual strategies each group would take to support each

other's programming, marketing, and education efforts. This process enabled PITT ARTS and its partners to create and agree upon a clear plan of support and action for the collaboration.

PITT ARTS also worked with key partners at Pitt to engage students in these programs, including Pitt faculty and staff, the Africana Studies department, the Office of Student Affairs, the Office of Affirmative Action, and the Advisor to Black Action Society. As part of A3P, PITT ARTS co-sponsored an event with the Office of Affirmative Action and the Black Action Society, an on-campus program that celebrated the works of writers August Wilson and Pitt's own Rob Penny that attracted over 80 Pitt students and was well received.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF RACIAL AWARENESS

White organizations, in efforts to diversify their audiences, often collaborate with minority arts organizations in order to expand audiences. One issue that arose in conversations between PITT ARTS and its partners was the perception that small organizations, particularly Black groups, may have of White partnering organizations as "monolithic White organizations" and how that perception affects partnerships. One of our partners had strong concerns about a planned meeting of A3P partners to discuss Black students' needs and ways to meet them. He felt the data collection methods PITT ARTS used reminded him of models he had encountered with another department at Pitt. According to our partner, although this department dealt with the needs of African Americans, it was not actively supporting the Black community it served, particularly in the economically depressed area in which he lived and worked. He expressed unease about some of the language used in the planning email, which although innocuous from the sender's perspective, he interpreted as possibly racist. His concerns were somewhat mysterious until PITT ARTS spoke with him in a very open, fruitful, positive meeting about the issue.

His concern was that PITT ARTS could be perceived as just another White organization creating a program to "serve" the African American community without really contributing to the needs of it, and that active steps needed to be taken to dispel such perceptions. **Large White organizations wishing to partner with Black organizations must always be aware of and actively dispel any perceived image they have of being the "White monolithic organization."**

## WHEN COMMUNICATION BREAKS DOWN

In the previous case, although a miscommunication occurred, both PITT ARTS and its partner kept the communication lines open in a spirit of respect and resolution. More difficult challenges in the partner relationships occurred when this system of open communication was shut down.

In one significant instance, PITT ARTS ended its A3P relationship with one of its partners. During the planning of a three-way collaborative program, PITT ARTS conducted additional follow-up with one of the arts groups, who had not delivered promised program details for a previous similar program. The contact for this African American organization became antagonistic towards PITT ARTS, initially refusing requests to reconfirm program details directly with the participants. This contact later accused PITT ARTS of not trusting their leadership capabilities, wondering why they were being "singled out" for such treatment. Subsequent communications from this person became disrespectful, unhealthy, and hostile. Later meetings revealed that the contact was under stress due to massive personnel and technical issues within the organization, but none of this was communicated to PITT ARTS in a manner that was respectful or solution-oriented, making it impossible to continue the partnership. This example illustrates the extreme importance of open communication between partners to the success of such a project.

## AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTS: WHO CAN MAKE IT, AND WHO CAN PRESENT IT?

This interaction between African American and Whites in the arts is not limited only to organizational partnerships, but to a fundamental and thought-provoking question of who has the "right" to present and perform African American arts.

An issue often facing White organizations is how to create programming to meet the needs of and attract more diverse audiences, while contending with the charge from some African American arts professionals that they are infringing on the territory of presenting Black arts. This double-edged sword has been an issue within the arts community for years, that only African American organizations and artists can present and truly understand the nature of African American art, and that White organizations who try to do so may not fully understand the nature of the material, or are presenting such art in a shallow attempt to "reach out" to the Black community. This perception of an organization, of course, depends on the arts group and its programs. One of the groups PITT ARTS worked with is an art gallery that regularly shows the work of African American, Native American, and Asian artists. This dedication to exhibiting the work of multicultural artists is built into their very mission statement, and integrated it into their fundamental vision of the organization.

During an on-campus dance program featuring two African American dance companies, nearly all of the dancers were White women. These dancers viewed their experiences with these African American dance companies as opportunities to expand their horizons, both professionally and personally. As one dancer put it, "it's not everyday that you see a little White girl doing African

dance.” Some African American students who attended this dance program stated that they preferred to see African American art performed by African Americans. This example again illustrates the type of cross-cultural interaction that can occur within the art world, but also raises the question of the availability of African American dancers in particular, and artists in general, to fill important spots within African American arts organizations.

**PITT ARTS believes that White arts organizations who are seeking to create programming that will resound with multicultural audiences must reconsider the definition of “diversity” and the longer, richer, deeper commitment such work entails.** As arts consultant Vanessa Whang suggested in her Respondent Report for the African American Cultural Center’s *Diversity Revisited* monograph:

What it means to diversify programming, audiences, organizational staff and leadership can no longer be about “just add, stir, and presto!”.... It’s not just about getting those “black faces in high places.” It’s not just about numbers and percentages and how many people of color you have on your board. It’s not just about what’s on the program for Cinco de Mayo or Black History Month. It is infinitely more subtle, more rich, more multidimensional. It has immeasurable “weight and solidity.” It’s about diversifying ways of thinking and being, diversifying ways of doing business and ways of conducting interpersonal and communal relationships. It’s about diversifying the aesthetic standards with which we measure and recognize excellence and skill. It’s about diversifying our knowledge base and common vocabulary. (28)

## **CREATING A HOME: SUPPORT FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTS**

PITT ARTS also recognizes the deep need for African Americans to create spaces of creative power and cultural self-determination. To have one’s own creative space, with adequate funding, talented people, and with the freedom to present as one wishes, is the dream of every arts organization, but is especially important for African American artists who have been systematically denied access to or overlooked for such opportunities. To have one’s own power in one’s hands, to speak one’s own story with clarity and truth, in one’s own house is critical in the establishment of African American creative culture, and the overall health of the African American community. **PITT ARTS strongly believes that African American arts organizations and artists need and deserve the artistic and particularly financial support required to be empowered and continue to present high-quality work.**

Many of the African American arts organizations PITT ARTS worked with listed community involvement, empowerment, and education through the arts as their central goals. The roles arts

organizations play within the African American community are often those of cultural preservers, youth leadership developers, and community gathering places. One dramatically successful model was a minority-directed organization dedicated to community empowerment and education through the arts. This group was in the very thick of it, located in the community it served, and treated its visitors with an incredible amount of respect. Although its programs were clearly dedicated to empowerment and social change, it did not follow the traditional model of other education and outreach models—taking disenfranchised students out of their neighborhoods and showing them the arts. This group engaged its students and visitors where they lived, encouraging them to change their communities from within instead of fleeing them. By building these community relationships, this group demonstrated its long-term care for its community, not simply as marketable audiences, but as creatively engaged human beings.

This dedication to education, as well as diminished funds from foundations for actual performances, can sometimes relegate the creation of art to a smaller role. Several of the African American arts organizations PITT ARTS worked with are reliant on grant funding for a major portion of their operating expenses. While this is not uncommon among the small arts community, this lack of funding is particularly significant for African American arts organizations. If a Black arts organization closes or is forced to scale back programs because of lack of funding, it can represent a significant shock to a vibrant, but small Black arts scene. One of A3P’s partners had to reschedule three days’ worth of programs because of difficulties securing funding from their grant foundation. **PITT ARTS calls upon the major grant institutions not only to continue the support they are giving to African American arts organizations, but to strongly consider increasing funding to match all the needs of such art organizations.** This funding can enable Black arts organizations to adequately fund and devote energy to education, fundraising, marketing, research, and art-making, without sacrificing time away from any of them. This level of support can also dramatically impact an organization’s ability to program. One organization with whom PITT ARTS had a long, positive relationship, added another night to its annual performance schedule because of the financial support PITT ARTS was able to provide.

This support of the African American arts community can also extend beyond the theatre doors to the larger Black artistic and business community. Whenever possible, arts organizations can support African American artists by featuring them as artists-in-residence or having them lead education programs; and also support African American businesses through catering jobs and renting spaces for special programs. All in all, PITT ARTS flowed over \$14,000 in direct support to African American art organizations, artists, educators, and businesses; eating at African American restaurants, renting Black clubs for special events, and hiring an African American videographer for the official A3P video project.

## SO WHAT DOES THIS WORK REALLY MEAN?

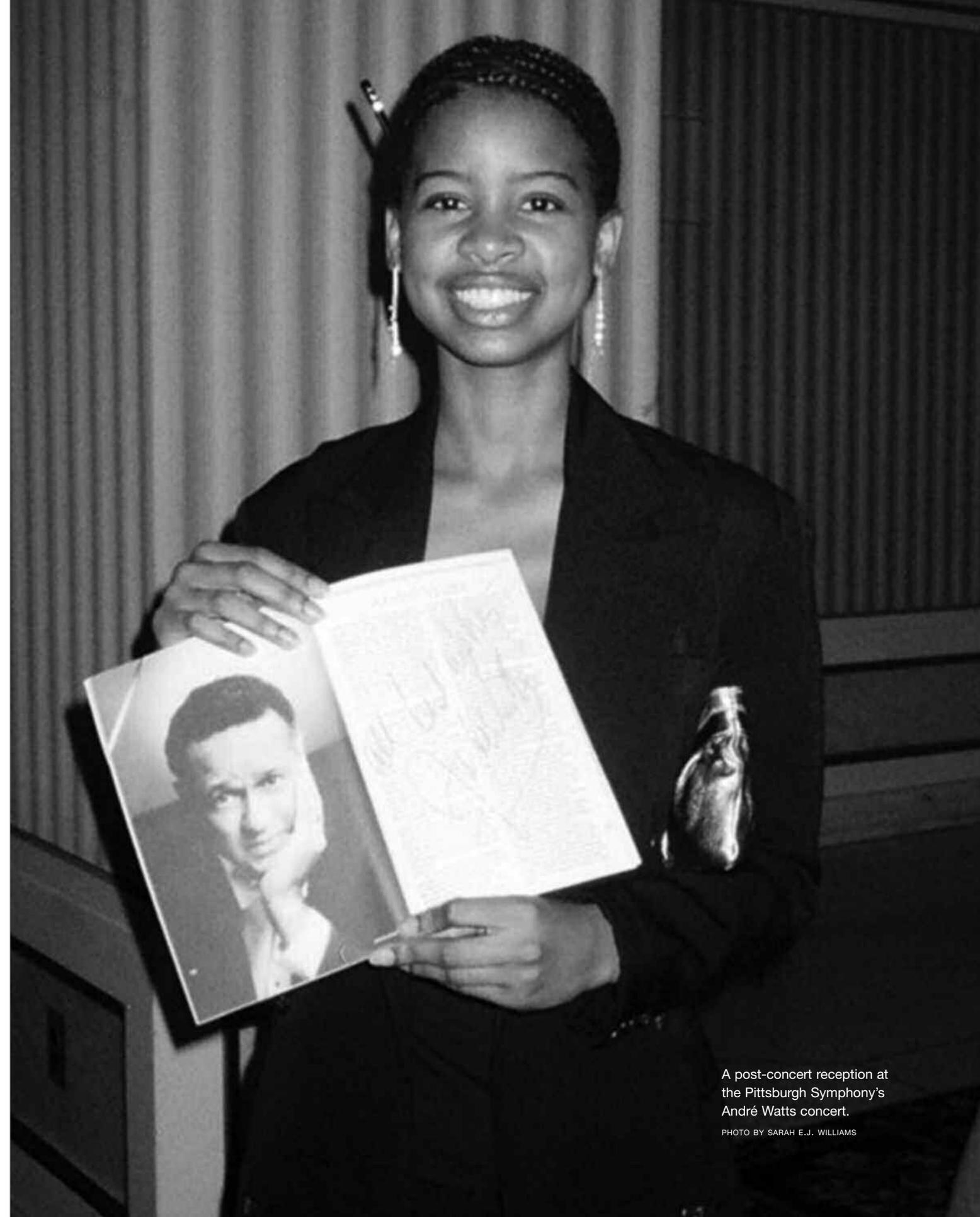
As stated at the beginning of this document, PITT ARTS' main goals for the African American Arts Project were to support the cultural needs of both African American students and arts organizations, from financial and audience development support for arts groups to high quality, stimulating programs for students. As the project developed, it became clear that PITT ARTS' work truly centered around and questioned larger issues of equality, diversity, cultural vitality, and civic engagement through the arts.

A3P has exerted a profound impact upon the lives of the African American and non-Black students who participated in it. Programs such as these have offered students opportunities for deep and complete enrichment on all levels, from the personal and cultural to the social and political. These programs afforded all students chances to expand their intellectual horizons in a fun yet stimulating manner: "When all you hear of are 'bump and grind' parties on campus, it's refreshing to see a diverse amount of peers at something more intellect based." And the simple act of directly experiencing art provided wonderful inspiration for students: "I have never been to a program like this before, engaging and witnessing people who are passionate about their art. It was very inspiring and made me want to further develop my desires." Both Black and non-Black students' interactions with these arts have rarely been "art for art's sake;" instead, the art speaks to these students' very minds and spirits.

For an African American young adult to dance along with African dance companies, their modern styles echoing ancient moves; or to recognize the mannerisms of their families or friends in the staging of August Wilson's plays, it is a reckoning of the greatest sort. To see the whole humanity of one's self on stage, celebrated and explored with respect and reverence, engendered a sense of pride in the African American students who experienced this art: "I love African American Art because it gives me a new way to keep in touch with my heritage."

As for non-Black students, they have been interested in A3P programs from the beginning. For these students, these programs were not only opportunities to experience vibrant and meaningful art, but to also diversify their art experiences and engage in dialogue with their fellow students. This art was new, exciting, and eye-opening to them, not only in its beauty, but its capacity to challenge their thinking, as one White student explained: "Very, very thought provoking. Encourages me to question my own thoughts/actions—those of society."

By their very nature as art forms created out of ingenuity, intelligence, and imagination under circumstances of suffering, struggle, and self-preservation, African American arts act as a lens for exploring the American experience from all sides—perpetrator, survivor, bystander, and reconciler. Many of the artist discussions have delved into racial issues, including the effects of racism and slavery upon African American culture and arts, the changing definitions of urban and



A post-concert reception at the Pittsburgh Symphony's André Watts concert.

PHOTO BY SARAH E.J. WILLIAMS

Black culture, and internalized racism. One striking example of the impact A3P has had on such dialogue occurred during one program, a play that explored the devastating effects of internalized racism upon the characters. After the play, on the bus ride home, an impromptu dialogue ensued among several Black students, including PITT ARTS' A3P intern, and one White student who wanted to know more about this phenomenon in the Black community. According to PITT ARTS' intern, the two had an hour long conversation about many issues concerning race, White privilege, cultural diffusion and appropriation, and how to go about learning about different cultures. The intern said that although the dialogue was difficult, it was fruitful, and all involved benefited from the experience.

Such arts also afford African American young adults with opportunities to critically examine larger issues of the African Diaspora, such as identity, economics, politics, etc., and then consider how to positively shape the communities in which they live that are affected by such issues. One example was an artist talk on August Wilson's early life in Pittsburgh, led by actor, activist, and friend to Wilson, Sala Udin. As he remarked, the arts were a catalyst for social change, and no more so than in the African American community. The arts were used to bring people to a cause: once people were seated in their theatre chairs, they could be presented with and mobilized around larger issues in the Black community. This same impact could be felt among students who attended this program: "[His talk] gave me insight as to what we need to do as Black people to shape our culture in a more positive light/direction."

Building and shaping community around the arts is just as significant for students. When students were asked if participating in PITT ARTS programs encouraged them to remain at Pitt, 72% of African American students who attended A3P programs responded either "yes" or "maybe." This figure is impressive considering that universities nationally are examining issues of campus cultural vitality and retention. According to the most recent statistics on undergraduate graduation rates from the University of Pittsburgh Provost, as published in the February 3, 2005 *University Times* (1), 59.8% of African American students had a six-year graduation rate, compared with a six-year graduation rate of 64.7% for the University as a whole. Considering that the Black graduation rate is over 7% lower than the University's average, and 10% lower than the 70.5% median graduation rate for similar institutions determined by The Education Trust, presenting arts that honor and educate students about their own cultures, in a positive manner and on a regular basis may be a strong factor in encouraging the retention of African American students at their universities all the way to graduation day. As one student said of an A3P program, "This event made me feel more pride for the city and University of Pittsburgh, particularly the cultural value of the place I consider my home."

These programs added to the cultural vitality of these students' lives by adding to and reconfirming the vitality of their very selves. And it is common wisdom that one who is living in a vital way is one more likely to achieve, thrive, and live as a whole, beautiful human being. This is the ultimate core of the African American Arts Project: personal, cultural, and societal healing through the power of art.

## IN REVIEW

Below are a number of key strategies that may be useful to arts organizations as they seek to engage African American young adult audiences. Whether these are new methods, or established practices, these were the most effective approaches that PITT ARTS and its partners employed to draw an African American young adult audience.

### Programming

- :: Create programs of relevance to African American young adults, performances or exhibitions that celebrate, concern, or otherwise inquire into African American culture
- :: Integrate such regular programming into the very mission of the organization
- :: Recognize the diversity of audience within the African American young adult community
- :: Create programs at which Black young adults can directly participate in their own experience

### Marketing

- :: Utilize marketing avenues appropriate to this audience (email, Black student groups, street team, flyering, word of mouth)
- :: Emphasize experience and emotion of art in marketing language
- :: Mention in marketing that this is African American programming

### Education

- :: Create education programs which accurately investigate the art without bypassing the depth and seriousness of the material
- :: Connect African American young adults directly with artists whenever possible
- :: Speak *with* students, not *at* them.
- :: Train all majority staff in cultural sensitivity/working with African American young adult audiences, particularly frontline staff (education, visitor services)

### Community Outreach and Collaboration

- :: Make sincere efforts to forge links in and give back to the Black community

- :: White organizations should invite key African American leaders to be on advisory boards to co-determine appropriate planning, programming and outreach strategies
- :: Create open, mutually beneficial partnerships with relevant arts organizations and community groups

## CONCLUSIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While the primary objective of A3P was to make African American students at the University of Pittsburgh a home in the arts community of Pittsburgh, and in so doing help these students build into invested citizenship and leadership, with them on these specialized arts programs also came majority students learning about African American arts, and becoming more fully enriched persons along the way. This project is clearly the most important work that PITT ARTS has done to date, and we understand that there is more work yet to be done. The commitment to such endeavors as A3P can only enhance our future as leaders of every ethnicity become world-ready through extraordinary education at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as through extraordinary opportunity.

In recognition of its commitment to promoting diversity, intercultural student dialogue, and student empowerment through the arts, PITT ARTS was awarded the 2006 Chancellor's Affirmative Action Award from the University of Pittsburgh. This internal recognition of both PITT ARTS' overall commitment to multiculturalism and the development of A3P is a major testament to the success of this program, its impact upon students, and the faith in its benefits that the University has demonstrated. PITT ARTS sincerely and deeply thanks Chancellor Mark A. Nordenberg for this honor.

PITT ARTS would not have been able to accomplish this project without the visionary support of University of Pittsburgh Provost James V. Maher, and Vice Provost Robert F. Pack. For all they do and have done for PITT ARTS, as ever, we extend to them our greatest thanks.

Our deepest and most profound gratitude is due to the Heinz Endowments for their unwavering support for three PITT ARTS research projects that have spanned six years, and we thank them especially for the supporting the vision that has made A3P possible.

The African American Arts Project could not have had such success without the imagination, bravery, and support of many groups and individuals:

PITT ARTS sincerely and strongly thanks all of our partner organizations and the resourceful, talented people at these groups for the opportunity for this positive, mutually-beneficial, and life-changing collaboration around African American arts. These two years of both new and deepened partnerships was an amazing learning and growth experience, and PITT ARTS is very pleased it could grow in such ways with them.

Our gratitude must go to our many allies in this project at Pitt, those professors, departments, staff, and advisors who understood and shared the vision of A3P with their students. Special thanks also go to the Office of Affirmative Action and the Black Action Society for their kind co-sponsorship of the on-campus Midnight Espresso: August Wilson and Rob Penny event.

To PITT ARTS' A3P interns, without their efforts in reaching out to the African American student community, leading programs, coordinating the street team, and compiling survey data, much of the grassroots A3P work would not have occurred.

Last, PITT ARTS acknowledges the nearly 1000 Pitt undergraduates of all backgrounds and ethnicities who participated in A3P programs and shared their feedback in focus groups, impromptu conversations, emails, and many, many surveys. Their thoughtful, questioning, engaging, and wonderful selves were both the motivation for creating A3P, and the pleasure in experiencing it. PITT ARTS hopes that through the results of this work, they may experience greater cultural fulfillment, be inspired to create on their own, and find warm and welcoming homes at all of the world's arts.

## THE AUTHORS

**Annabelle Clippinger**, Director of PITT ARTS, is a poet and educator. She has had two books of poetry published, *Sky Frame* (2000), and *Cloud Banner* (2002), both by publisher of avant-garde literature, Potes & Poets Press. She is a member of the Board of Directors of The Guitar Society of Fine Art, The New Leadership Board of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra, and the Advisory Board for the International Poetry Forum. A member of the Staff Association Council at the University of Pittsburgh, Annabelle serves on the University of Pittsburgh Senate's Standing Committee for the University of Pittsburgh Press. She has also served as Co-Editor of *Poethia*, a poetry journal, and as Editor of the *Palimpsest Review*. Since 1990, Annabelle has expressed her commitment to the education of young adults by teaching university students English and Creative Writing, and establishing a Visiting Writers Series during her time teaching at Penn State University. She is currently an instructor of English at the University of Pittsburgh, and received her M.F.A. from Syracuse University.

**Sarah E.J. Williams** served as Arts Education Coordinator for PITT ARTS African American Arts Project from 2004–2006. A poet, mixed media artist, and educator, her focus is on the arts as a tool for personal healing and social change, and she has read her poetry and exhibited her art at multiple sites in Pittsburgh. She serves on the Grantmaking Committee of the Three Rivers Community Foundation and on the Advisory Board to the BridgeSpotters Collective. She has also served on the Board of Directors for the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh. In 2003 she received the Thomas Merton Center's New Person Award in recognition for *Free to Be: African American Women's Hair Circle*, one of The Andy Warhol Museum's Artist Educator Dialogue Projects. Since 2000 she has been involved in museum education both at the Warhol and at The Mattress Factory. She received her B.F.A. from Seton Hill College.

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The figure on the covers is called *sankofa*. This symbol is part of the West African art of *adinkra*, sacred and ceremonial cloths hand-printed with motifs representing proverbs, religious concepts, parts of nature, and historical events. Literally meaning “to go back and fetch it,” it represents the importance of exploring, learning from, and building upon the past to create a positive and prosperous future. Students who participated in the African American Arts Project have reached into the past of the African American experience to touch the ancestors, learn from their struggles, ingenuity, and creativity, and then used that knowledge to enrich their lives and propel forward their futures.





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