

Kinnara Ensemble: A Project-Based Choir

TEACHER NOTES

Learning Objectives

- Summarize the idea of a project-based model for an arts organization.
- Articulate the benefits and limitations of sourcing local and national talent.
- Recognize administrative choices for improving the artistic product.
- Develop strategies or models for stabilizing an arts organization's public funding.

Topics For Discussion

Project-Based Model

The case concerns the structure and activities of Kinnara Ensemble, a medium-size professional choir of around 32 voices, whose mission is “to engage the public in exemplary choral experiences that speak to the modern soul.” Led by J.D. Burnett, Kinnara began as a local cohort of alumni from Westminster Choir College, but has since transformed into a group drawing on a wider and more varied network of singers. As concert series and recordings became “project-based” arrangements, members’ volunteer status has steadily developed into paid choir positions.

- Ask students to define the “project-based” model, as they understand it. What are its key qualities? Are students aware of other musical arts organizations that function similarly?
- Kinnara’s experiment with project-based work had an effect on the makeup of the chamber choir. With each program and roster independently conceived *ad hoc*, the director could determine exactly which singers—and how many—would be ideal for each project undertaking. The case highlights how this can be a “dream scenario” for a director. Project-based organizations allow the director to tailor each program to its specific vocal needs, rather than be hamstrung with an equally balanced voice parts, which may not reflect the program complexion.
 - ♦ Discuss the merits of the *ad hoc* ensemble (like a revolving door of artistic personnel) versus an unchanging (or slowly changing) one.
 - ♦ What are some unintended consequences of drastic shifts to a roster to suit the needs of a program or other undertaking?



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Local and National Talent

The case follows Kinnara's transition to a "project-based" model that now sources vocal talent regionally and from around the United States, as needed. Kinnara's evolution in this direction brought it in line with similar professional choirs. These groups typically have recruited talent nationally for short stints or tours with programs of limited scope.

- Because the core of Kinnara ensemble was a group of graduates from Westminster Choir College, a strategic shift to national sourcing of singers would necessarily dilute not only the local stamp on the organization, but also the shared pedigree of the choir members. J.D. Burnett was willing to trade these things for the quality that lay outside Kinnara's home base of Princeton. What was Burnett's concern with the "philosophical hegemony" of his early rosters? What may be lost when a local connection is diminished in an arts organization of this size?
- Burnett believed that a boost in Kinnara's artistic quality could be gained from outside specialists. But he was also sensitive to the mix of founding volunteers in the ensemble. What proportion of local to outside singers seems to be ideal for Kinnara? Did the recruitment of choral specialists achieve desired results?
- Kinnara Ensemble was founded in central New Jersey, situated between two important markets—New York City and Philadelphia—where professional choral music thrives. These cities also offer the kinds of singers from which Kinnara might draw. How did Kinnara fare with these singers before moving more firmly to a project-based model? What incentives would singers from New York City and Philadelphia have to join a project with Kinnara? How has Kinnara Ensemble leveraged relationships with singers in these major markets?

Supporting the Artistic Product

The case dissects the organization's progression from volunteer choir to fully-functioning 501(c)(3) nonprofit. Kinnara's organizational structure evolved from Burnett and a few colleagues to a working board with members around the country, managing the administrative needs of a transitioning choir with a budding national reputation. As Kinnara's artistic reputation grew, the requisite funding to support a national organization presented a variety of challenges for the administrative structure.

- What about Kinnara's history lends support to the idea of a working board? What in the organization's history confirms the need to shift toward a professional staff?
- Have students identify an appropriate level of professional staff for a small arts nonprofit. Which executive tasks are indispensable? How could responsibilities be combined? What organizational responsibilities can be outsourced to independent contractors?
- Using **Appendix 1**, discuss the merits of each revenue stream revealed in the case (project revenue, individual giving, government & institutional grants), focusing on the potential benefits and challenges for consistently funding each category. Consider trends in **Appendix 2**.
 - ♦ What administrative structure would best support each category as the primary revenue stream? What structure would best support a balanced approach across Kinnara?

Stabilizing Public Funding

The conclusion of the study focuses on how the transition to a project-based model increased Kinnara's dependence on public funding. After relative stability when following a more community-centric model, the fiscal years that coincided with the decision to draw national talent for projects have resulted in more instability in the category of public funding (**Appendix 1**). Reacting to the initial dip, Kinnara hired Managing Director Cory Klose and is certain that stabilizing public funding will be critical to future growth for the organization.

- If Kinnara's gradual disassociation from local singers led to the reduction in project revenue as well as local support, what options are still available to the organization to garner increased public support?
 - ♦ If the artists are nationally sourced, how could the organization capitalize on national connections for future programming and giving?
- Kinnara's peer organizations have developed thriving public support campaigns while being tethered to a specific locale. Discuss options for a project-based model to create community support and ownership for an ensemble that contracts with singers around the United States.
- Debate the benefits of local funding as opposed to national funding within Kinnara's new artistic arrangement. Encourage students to compare their prepared responses and propose new plans for Kinnara to stabilize public funding. Plans should address local resources, adjustments in organizational structure (board and staff), and the imbalances in revenue diversity witnessed in the case and its appendices.