

In Maryland, A Gateway to the Community Through the Arts

Gayle Stamler

Abstract

Over the past several decades, college and universities have discovered that their professional performing arts programs can provide unique gateways into the communities they serve. At the University of Maryland, the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center opens new doors to performance and learning for communities within and around the university through collaborative activities on and off campus. These are made possible in part by a unique relationship between the university and Prince George's County.

When the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at Maryland officially opened its doors in 2001, it announced to the world the presence of something new. There was, of course, the huge new facility, designed to integrate the university's academic performing arts departments with its professional presenting programs. The 318,000 square foot structure, situated on 17 acres of land near the edge of campus, was the largest single building ever constructed by the State of Maryland. It was also the first of its kind in the United States to have a significant financial commitment from the county in which it is located.

The Center was originally conceived as an academic center for teaching the performing arts, but during the planning stages that mission evolved to include not only presentation of performances by touring artists, but also the creation of programs that focused on, and engaged, the people of Prince George's County. The nature of these community programs was undefined at the beginning, but through ongoing dialogue became clearer and assumed a prominent place in making the case for the Center.

Indeed, the building's design evokes a community for the arts, uniting under a single roof six performance spaces of varying sizes, as well as three performing arts academic units, a performing arts library, and rehearsal and classroom space. There is a comfortable, yet elegant, feel to the spacious lobby, which the architect envisioned as a kind of "Main Street" that would welcome people into the facility.

The Center's Web site describes a quintessential scene:

At any given moment, the Clarice Smith Center is alive with concerts, plays, classes and recitals representing both great artistic traditions and contemporary creativity. A guest choreographer collaborates with student dancers on a new work; a visitor to the ticket office is unexpectedly serenaded by opera students

in open rehearsal in the Grand Pavilion; crews load in scenery for the latest theatre performance while school children flock in for a special event. Dynamic and spirited, the Center is a place that is committed to actively engaging the community in arts discovery and exploration.

“Dedication Week” in September 2001— which actually encompassed ten days of activities— clearly reflected the Center’s plans to serve as a resource for the university, the county, and beyond.

“When I came to the Center in 1999, plans for the opening focused on the typical black-tie gala with lots of famous entertainers,” says Susie Farr, the Center’s executive director. “We scratched those plans almost immediately because we wanted the opening to be emblematic of our mission and to introduce all of our publics to the center. A single big fancy gala would only recognize a small—although important—portion of our supporters.”

Instead, there were multiple events involving multiple constituencies. The dedication planners invited students, faculty, alumni, and local artists to perform at a big-ticket black tie gala in honor of private donors and state officials, that showcased the incredible talent that exists here as well as famous artists with a Maryland connection, such as the Guarneri String Quartet and Billy Taylor. There were also separate dedications for each of the academic units—music, theater, and dance—and scheduled public performances by artists whose fame index is not yet equal to their talent. The unique flavor of the dedication increased exponentially on the third night of activities, when a big reception for Prince George’s County employees was disrupted by a tornado.

“We were all out in the courtyard at a preperformance reception when the tornado came right over the hill,” Farr says. “Needless to say, the reception was demolished, the performances schedule that evening were cancelled and the building sustained significant damage. We were closed down for three days for repairs, but reopened by the end of the week for the University orchestra’s performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, followed the next night by the gala.”

The celebration picked up without missing too many beats, and on the final Sunday, the Center hosted an open house for anyone who wanted to come, featuring performances by campus and local artists in all of its venues. More than 8,000 people showed up, mostly community members who had no affiliation with the campus.

“The idea was to say, ‘This place is not like other places.’ What we did at the beginning had to set the tone for what we were going to be. And it worked,” Farr says.

Government priorities at the forefront

From the start, the Center’s plan for service to the community was linked to local government priorities. Prince George’s County had, within a fairly short period of time, changed from a largely rural, largely white county into a growing suburban community with a majority African-American population. As the nature of the county changed, county officials began to discuss building a municipal performing arts center for the expanding population.

Former Maryland Governor Parris Glendening was Prince George’s County Executive when the idea for the Center was first discussed. He recalls the genesis of the project:

When I first became county executive back in 1982 we pulled together a series of policy groups and asked them to think big picture, real vision, about what Prince George’s County could be. One group, which was focusing primarily on quality of life issues, recommended that we should have a major performing arts center in the county, supported by a series of neighborhood or community playhouses. I took that recommendation very seriously and noted the important role that arts play in just about any community, and certainly in an area as sophisticated as the Washington metropolitan area.

One thing became clear: Going it alone was extraordinarily expensive—\$50 million or more at that time—and perhaps even more importantly, there were doubts that a county-operated center could be as successful as a center that was affiliated with something larger. So we went to the university. Brit Kirwan was chancellor—he’s quite a supporter of the arts—and we talked about how potentially to make this work. At the same time, as a total coincidence, the university was in ongoing discussions about how to redo their performing arts center. From that point, everything just grew. We saw that we had an opportunity to make a very major statement in support of the arts that would benefit not only the university and Prince George’s County, but also the entire metropolitan area.

Conversations about the new Center stretched out over a decade, Glendening recalls. Then, he says, “by good fortune, I became governor, and the county and university came to me for support. We had some significant support in the legislature to get this together. Eventually, Prince George’s County committed \$10 million to the construction budget in return for services to the county.”

When Susie Farr became executive director of the Clarice Smith Center in Fall 1999, she brought with her a deep commitment to just such community engagement. Farr had spent the previous 13 years as the director of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, a national service organization for performing arts professionals. As part of her work there she had helped develop, nurture, and bring to national prominence the concept of collaborative work with communities.

By the early 1990s, large institutions such as university performing arts series and municipal performing arts centers were moving away from the concept of “outreach” and toward the idea that meaningful opportunities for involvement in the arts might best be achieved in partnership with the communities they served. Previously, these major institutions often designed and carried out “outreach” programs with little or no input from the intended participants; now they began to consult with community organizations and leaders to create programs that would truly reflect the interests of their constituents. This emphasis on community engagement had a profound influence on the way that arts professionals interacted with their communities, and often resulted in programs that transcended the boundaries of the stage. Presenters could partner with smaller community organizations to reach people who might never otherwise come into their facilities. Programs might take place in community centers, libraries, churches, schools, fellowship halls—or on campuses. The idea was to create a presence for the performing arts program throughout the community, and to build pathways between the presenter’s home base and the other places where people gather to enrich their lives. Ideally, these would be two-way streets. For the Center, this two-way relationship has always been an important goal.

“Our definition of ‘education corridors’ is an interchange, building bridges back and forth between the Center and the community,” says Ruth Waalkes, the Center’s Director of Cultural Participation.

Community Partnerships at the Core

In just a few short years, the Clarice Smith Center has cultivated relationships that create a presence for the university through other community organizations, and among individuals who take advantage of the Center’s programs. The ultimate goal is to make sure that this presence extends to where community members live, shop, work, and go to school. The university has formal partnerships with the Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission (M-NCPPC), Northwestern High School, Hyattsville Middle School, and the Gateway Arts District redevelopment project, and less formal relationships with several other entities.

Barbara Funk is Director of the Arts and Cultural Heritage Division of the Maryland-National Capital Parks and Planning Commission, a separate bi-county agency within the county government. M-NCPPC was created by the Maryland General Assembly in 1927 to develop and operate public park systems and provide land use planning for the physical development of the great majority of Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties, and to operate the public recreation program in Prince George’s County. (Funds that supported the investment in the Center came from Prince George’s County taxpayers.) As a representative of M-NCPPC, Funk was involved in the development of the Center from the beginning.

“We were looked at as a real partner,” she says. “I sat on every search committee, was part of the architectural committee, helped in policy decisions and major

construction decisions. I was able to participate in all discussions and influence them to benefit the county.”

At the outset, county representatives perceived the potential benefits of the project:

- An arts center that would provide county residents with the opportunity to see world-class performers, right in their own backyard;
- Access for Prince George’s County organizations and artists into the Center; not as outsiders, but as equal partners;
- Dedicated space within the Center for meetings, day camps and other activities; and
- Rent subsidies and technical support for performing groups in the Center’s six performance spaces.

While the county had much to gain from its involvement in developing the Center, the university benefited from having an outside perspective about its plans. As an example, Funk cites the fact that early discussions included no mention of a parking garage—seemingly a small detail, but one that might have a tremendous impact on off-campus participation. (The parking garage was eventually built, and is used for various campus activities.)

A larger issue, Funk says, was that the university had never really embraced the ethnic diversity of Prince George’s county:

A lot of [the university’s] literature in the past never even referenced that it was in Prince George’s County. The ethnic diversity has changed fairly significantly over the last 20 years, and there have been racial tensions on campus. Many African Americans in the county have not gone to the University of Maryland; they have gone to historically black colleges. Having this center was an opportunity to open the gates and to put all of our resources together and, by working together, to meet the needs of the county and the university. Aspiring artists from Prince George’s County can go to the University of Maryland, can study at the University of Maryland, can take advantage of all the community opportunities.

One investment in future relations between county residents and the university is a summer camp program at the Center that is run by the M-NCPPC. The programs are fully filled, and there are always waiting lists.

“Young kids are coming to campus, they have access to wonderful performing spaces,” Funk says. “It has to influence them in their career choices, where they’re going to study—the fact is, they’re coming on campus, their parents are coming on campus; they feel welcome here.”

There is a legal document that outlines the relationship between the M-NCPPC and the Center, and Funk credits Farr and her staff for fully embracing the spirit of the agreement.

“My staff and I know everyone, feel part of everything, feel we have full access. It’s such an opportunity for county artists, the community, and the school system. I would have never thought [the creation of the Center] could have happened. It exceeded my wildest dreams,” she says. “There were many nay-sayers at the beginning; the relationships between the university and the county were not as strong as they should have been. The fact that the Center is now touted as one of crown jewels of the county is so exciting.”

Peter Shapiro, Chair of the Prince George’s County Council, says that the county’s aspirations at the outset were to fully engage the community in the development and operation of the facility. The quid pro quo for the county’s financial investment, he says, was access to space, rental credits, and involvement in shaping the programming. He characterizes the relationship as “a rousing success:”

One of the things it has done is to provide an arena for community arts organizations to stage shows—local dance companies, theater companies, lots of involvement from local schools and school-children. It has become a place where county leaders, business leaders, and government leaders have events, so at some level it has also become a gathering place and an event site. The other thing that it has done, a truly wonderful thing, is help serve as an inspiration for us as we have developed an Arts and Entertainment District. The University of Maryland is a major player [in that endeavor.]

What we see as the role of the arts is a truly integrated holistic development strategy. It’s not just about bringing culture into the community—it’s also about improving schools, keeping the community safer, jobs, bricks and mortar, physical improvements. We have had a lot of town-and-gown issues in the past and what the center has done is become an integrating piece between the university and community. I think that’s one of the roles the arts can play—creating discussions around race and class, creating a space for dialogue and interaction. Because of the Clarice Smith Center, the community feels better about the university and I believe vice versa.

An unusual community partner is the Gateway Community Development Corporation (Gateway CDC), which seeks to revitalize four county municipalities along a two-mile stretch of Maryland’s Route 1. To do so, Gateway CDC will use civic engagement, arts resources, and leveraged partnerships to advance commercial and residential development and expand programs and services to residents and business owners. The main entrance to the University of Maryland is further up Route 1 in College Park, outside of Gateway’s target area. Nonetheless, the Center is one of 21 institutions collaborating in the development effort. “They refer to us as their ‘northern anchor,’” Farr says.

Imani Drayton-Hill, Development Director for Gateway, says,

It is natural that we should be working with [the Center] because we’re using culture for community development. At this point, our collaboration is primarily shared programming. [The Center] may bring in a performance and

we'll do a community-based workshop down in the arts district. The real question is how can we actually collaborate and bridge the distance between a large nonprofit like The Clarice Smith Center and small nonprofits who have really different time cycles in the way that work gets produced. We both want to build audiences, and create a sense of identity and place.

Drayton-Hill says that there's a sense of expectations in both directions, but because Gateway and the Center are both fairly new, it is still to be determined what can happen.

We're anticipating that when this two-mile section of the Gateway Arts District is underway, it will spur development all the way up Route 1 to College Park. Shared physical space is a very solid reality for the future but there's a way to go before people start seeing this as an united corridor. Again, it comes back to a sense of identity of place—changing the types of businesses that are on the corridor, creating new structures that will architecturally animate the corridor. The Center is part of that discussion—what kind of art we're going to have down here. We feel that this relationship's going to evolve, because if development happens the way that we anticipate, it's going to drive [the Gateway Arts District] all the way up to the Beltway.

One other major area of engagement with the county has been the public schools. To date, the Center has been engaged in four school-oriented projects.

- At Mt. Rainier Elementary School, there is a three-way partnership between the school, the Center, and the university's School of Music, which identified three of its student chamber ensembles to work with third- and fourth-graders. Faculty members from the School of Music and the School of Music Education participate in training the ensembles to work with the children. The program also engages one visiting chamber music ensemble to work with both university and elementary school students who are involved with the project.
- The Center supports an artist-in-residence program at Northwestern High School, where a composer works with the theater teacher to create a multidisciplinary work. The students write poetry, the composer creates a score, and the resulting work is performed at the Center. In the second year of this partnership, a choreographer has joined the project.
- In conjunction with the Olney Theater Center, the Center is sponsoring a Playwrights in Progress residency at Hyattsville Middle School for the second year in a row. This project brings a theater arts education specialist from Olney into the school to work with students during a series of sessions in the fall. During this time, the students develop story concepts and write their own plays, often touching on very serious issues reflective of their personal experiences. In January, the students' plays are presented as an evening of public, staged readings at the Center, with a cast comprised of University students and professional actors.

- The Center is also involved with Colours, a performance group with students ages 8–18 from multiple county schools. Colours works out of Northwestern High School but the Center’s relationship with the group is less academically-based. “We just find opportunities to do things together,” Farr says. The group buys student tickets to many of the modern dance performances and come to the pre- and post-performance discussions, where, Farr says, “They ask the best questions.” Colours performed at the university’s dedication of a new statue of Jim Henson, who was a Maryland alumnus. Most recently, the Center teamed up with Prince George’s Plaza Shopping Center and Joe’s Movement Emporium to cohost a performance by Colours and the Balafon West African Dance Ensemble on a busy Saturday afternoon at the plaza.

Farr notes that the Colours director uses the performance troupe as a way to focus its members on academic discipline, making academics its first priority, leadership its second, and performance the reward. Three of last year’s graduates from Colours are now attending the University of Maryland.

Ruth Waalkes says “For us, arts programs in the traditional sense—presenting an occasional performance for large numbers of students—isn’t a priority. We’ve chosen instead to work with specific schools in focused, ongoing projects, versus busing kids in and out for school matinees. We’re working small and deliberately.”

Connecting With Individuals

Another major component in the Center’s efforts is to engage the general public as participants in long-term artist residencies.

Susie Farr remarked, “Our goal is for visiting artists to make an impact beyond that of an individual performance. We work closely with our artists to develop real relationships with our campus and the greater community.”

One such recent project is “The Vocal Community,” a community choir created in collaboration with Dr. Ysaye Barnwell, a member of the Grammy-award winning a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock. The choir is offered credit through the School of Music, and is also open to community members free of charge as a noncredit course. Participants attend weekly two-hour sessions exploring the deep roots of African-American choral and congregational traditions. Each session includes a half-hour lecture and 90 minutes of rehearsal. All participants, students and non-students alike, keep journals and all learn repertoire for a performance in concert with Sweet Honey in the Rock at the Clarice Smith Center’s 1,100-seat DeKelbourn Concert Hall.

Just before six on a Tuesday evening in early November, the huge parking lot off the university’s main drag is crammed with cars. Foot traffic flows in every direction—toward the red-brick buildings where evening classes are just beginning, and out into the parking lot for the ride home. The old Tawes Fine Arts Building—formerly the university’s performing arts center, now primarily a classroom building—is the focus

of much of the activity, but not everyone hurrying in that direction is a student. Some of them are members of “The Vocal Community.” As the last few participants drop into their seats in the small auditorium where rehearsals are held, Barnwell stands on stage facing the group, and with sweeping arm motions coaxes—commands—a powerful, massed sound from the 150 or so choir members, who sway in their seats as they sing.

It’s a group that aptly represents both the diversity of the metropolitan Washington area and the multi-generational appeal of the project. The sea of swaying heads is crowned by dreadlocks, gray-haired bobs, flowing tresses of every youthful hue, business-like salt-and-pepper trims, boldly-patterned head wraps, watch caps, and at least one spiky purplish ‘do. People are in business suits, sweatshirts, jeans, color-coordinated casual clothing. Wherever they came from, and wherever they’re going afterward, the group is united in its respectful attention to their director. Even in a large metropolitan area like this one, opportunities to work with a world-class artist don’t come along every day.

Carmen James Lane, who sings in the alto section, heard that Barnwell would lead the community choir project one evening while she was at a class at the Levine School of Music in Washington.

I was so thrilled about the prospect of being able to study with her over a period of time, and then perform in this concert, I literally e-mailed Adina [Williams, the Center’s Community Engagement Manager,] first thing the next morning and asked to be put in the class. I also talked to my father-in-law, who is an older gentleman. He was an operatic baritone and said he would be willing to take the class with me. We were one of the first couple of people to register, and we’ve been doing it together. It has been such an incredible experience.

This evening, Syrilda Tate has brought her nine-year-old grandson to the rehearsal, and he plays quietly in the back of the room while she sings. Tate lives in Forestville, a Prince George’s community less than 20 miles from the university, but before she began singing with the choir, she had never been on campus. She heard about the project from a friend who is connected to Sweet Honey in the Rock, and signed up immediately. Now that she knows her way around, she is ready to come back anytime. “I love this project,” she says quietly. “I hope they’ll do more things like this in the future.”

If ticket sales are a factor, more projects of the kind seem likely. At the end of the rehearsal, Barnwell announces that the December 9 concert, which is still a month away, is already sold out. An excited buzz greets the announcement. Then she asks for a show of hands for the tour of the Center that is to take place after the next rehearsal.

“How many of you have never been to the Clarice Smith Center?” she asks. A good portion of the crowd raises their hands. “Well, there is something special in store for you next week,” she says.

The Center also seeks multi-partner collaborations that can bring together and serve a number of constituencies. The Center's next major community engagement project will engage poet/storyteller/musician David Gonzalez to lead a six-month residency celebrating the area's Latin American cultures. Drawing on personal stories from participants and incorporating these stories with music and dance, the project will culminate with a public performance that includes community members alongside professional jazz musicians. This residency will have at its core key partners with whom the Center has already established relationships, including the local nonprofit Latin American Folk Institute (LAFI), the Langley Park Community Center, and the local Mary Harris "Mother" Jones Elementary School, where the Hispanic student population of 511 comprises 70 percent of the school's total enrollment.

Ruth Waalkes notes,

The [Mother Jones] school will be an important partner in this project, which is an example of our ongoing commitment to Latin American artists and cultural expressions. The principal there is very supportive and so good at what she does. We've done a variety of programs with them, mostly smaller events where we take artists into the school. But we hope to work with them more in-depth for [David's] longer-term residency next year, involving the children and their families.

Challenges

As with any complex, high-visibility endeavor, there are many challenges. One of the major challenges in the Center's multi-level collaborations is finding a level of partnership that is rewarding for everyone. This may have different ramifications, depending on the partnership.

When working with other government agencies or large organizations, it is sometimes difficult to coordinate meetings or even phone calls, Farr says. "With all of the people involved, everyone's agendas are full of their own interests and needs; making time to find out what we can do together becomes a big challenge. There are many other imperatives for each of us to address within our own organizations."

The relationship with the Gateway Arts project is a particular challenge at the moment because everything is still in the developmental stage, Farr says. "They've got their hands full trying to figure out what they need to be doing next, which makes it hard for us to focus on specific things we could or should be doing. When their buildings are complete and they're operating, I think the work that we've been doing will pay off."

Working with smaller organizations may involve some of those same difficulties, and a few others as well. When there is a disparity in staff size and finances, the larger organization must be sure that, although money talks, it doesn't monopolize the conversation. Farr has found that frankly acknowledging what each partner brings to the table has worked well so far.

“It’s pretty much ‘we have the money, they have the nonfinancial resources,’ which include knowledge of the community and access to potential audiences,” Farr says. “When we partner with LAFI, we pay the artist but they have all the connections into the Latino community; we can’t access the community appropriately without them as contacts. The same thing holds true for the public schools: We pay for the projects, they make them happen.”

How to most effectively work with small user groups who are eligible for rent credits is another challenge for the Center, as well as the users. Potential users go to the Center staff to set up a date, then apply to the M-NCPPC for rental funding. If the funding they receive turns out not to be adequate, they must make the tough decision about whether they can actually afford to rent the space—something that may be difficult for them to determine. Because small arts groups seldom have the resources to fully market their events, and because they are not always experienced enough to accurately predict their box office returns, they may find that their actual sales leave them in debt to the Center. All of this is related to a larger issue: The Center is a professional house with certain expectations about how things should happen, and grassroots performing groups do not always share those expectations. Finding a way to reconcile these differing approaches will no doubt be an ongoing challenge.

One other area of potential difficulty is the Center’s role as part of a major institution with its own schedules and sometimes conflicting priorities.

“There are campus conditions or activities that may conflict with Center priorities—football game traffic; commencements; spring break; the unavailability of student crews during breaks and over the summer,” Farr says. “Our role as a good campus citizen is to organize the Center to be responsive and adjust in ways that truly benefit the campus.”

Rewards and Renewed Efforts

Whatever the challenges, the Center has already established itself as a major player in the community.

Barbara Funk says, “People I bump into in my work rave about programs they go to see, and all the free events, and the reasonable ticket prices. And the performers are not necessarily headliners; the public is not looking for that. The halls are so spectacular, and there’s the opportunity to see aspiring students, open rehearsals, preperformance talks—how artists are working, what was their inspiration. The amount of public that comes shows that [this Center] is meeting a need; there’s a true interest. I’m surprised at how many people have told me they’ve given up subscriptions downtown [Washington].”

Dr. C. J. Motes, President of the University of Maryland, takes pride in his institution's involvement in such an innovative undertaking.

This is a remarkable relationship—that is, a financial relationship, a programmatic relationship, a long-term linking in another way of the university to Prince George's County. The county's \$10 million contribution was truly extraordinary. In the whole United States, you probably wouldn't find anything approaching even a million [for a project of this kind].

It's very much in keeping with the purposes of the university and the center to connect with the community around us—schools, arts councils, other organizations should be free and welcome to come to this facility, and they are. ...It makes for a very complex facility. We now have the academic programs, relationship with county, and the relationship with the performing arts in the region and beyond. It's an unusual performing arts facility on campus, in that it's a performing space and academic space in one building. We really couldn't succeed here without this good relationship with the county. It's very natural and necessary for us to do this.

Cheryl Logan, Principal of Mary Harris "Mother" Jones Elementary School, says that involvement with the Center has created a sense of connection with the University of Maryland for the school and its students.

"We're really excited about it. It's a great partnership; we kind of take things as they come, so that if they have something to offer we can take advantage of it," she says.

As colleges and universities in urban communities expand their traditional roles and work on forging partnerships that will help reshape their cities, they can look to campus presenters such as the Clarice Smith Center for innovative ways to create positive change. Across the country, in communities as diverse as Tempe, Arizona and Urbana, Illinois—among many others—university presenters are already working to create strong ties with community partners. These partners bring to the table their own varied understanding of what the community needs. Listening to those voices will be crucial if the educational institution is to make a meaningful contribution to positive action.

Author Information

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