

ARTISTIC ENDEAVORS

UNIVERSITIES ARE VITAL TO HEALTHY ARTS COMMUNITIES

By BECCA BURKE

It seems obvious that colleges and universities play an important role in the cultural and artistic vibrancy of their communities – after all, who else attracts, employs and teaches artists in such large numbers? But until now, no one has attempted to quantify the cultural and economic connection between institutions of higher learning and their hometowns.

Last spring, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) awarded funding to two Boise State faculty toward a three-year research project called “Universities: Cultural Anchors in the Intermountain West.” The NEA supports projects nationwide that investigate the value and impact of the arts.

Dr. Amanda Ashley, assistant professor of community and regional planning, and Dr. Leslie Durham, professor of theatre arts and associate dean of the College of Arts

and Sciences, are overseeing the project, which is generating excitement among artists locally and nationally. The researchers are developing and analyzing the concept of how universities are cultural staples in their communities, while simultaneously improving upon opportunities and working conditions for artists.

“Universities are widely understood to be anchor institutions in communities, but people have not fully analyzed *how* universities anchor the arts specifically,” Durham said. “This is part of what is unique about our project.”

Ashley and Durham hope to create a comprehensive exploration of the cultural and economic impact universities like Boise State have on the development of arts communities in smaller western cities. This roadmap could later be duplicated in other cities and regions.

Durham said that their research has the potential to help local leaders across the West – the men and women crafting urban and university strategic plans – recognize the real economic and cultural value that arts play in their communities and translate that value into new actions that support the arts.

One of the major goals of the study is to develop an assessment tool enabling universities to determine how they currently support artist-driven economic development. The tool also would help cultivate the universities’ role in

realities of artist-driven investment in order to create awareness of the multiple and comprehensive ways to anchor arts economic development,” Durham said.

Although the project is still in the early stages of research and development, Ashley and Durham believe it will provide valuable insight and information regarding future strategic university investments in the arts.

In 2014, Ashley and Durham conducted a survey of artists in Boise that showed that

while many local artists do launch small businesses, professional development opportunities related to running these businesses are limited locally. With this in mind, Durham and Ashley have a long-term goal to start an arts entrepreneurship program at Boise State, based, in part, on their previous arts survey along with information they still are gathering and interpreting.

“We think Boise State is exceptionally well positioned for meeting this need and positively impacting artist workforce development in the Treasure Valley and beyond,” said Durham. **B**



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developing art and economic development opportunities within their communities.

Durham and Ashley see their tool as instrumental in understanding how communities and institutions efficiently assess and evaluate their involvement in the economic development of the arts.

“We believe that beyond a region-wide snapshot, it also will be useful for public universities to evaluate the perceptions and



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Leslie Durham and Amanda Ashley pose in front of Chad Erpelding’s artwork in the Visual Arts Center Gallery 1. They are developing a tool to assess how universities are engaging with local arts communities.



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