

# Racial Equity Assessment Report for National Guild for Community Arts Education

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for the



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## Introduction and Purpose

In this report we share the findings of a racial equity assessment completed by the Equity Literacy Institute (ELI) for the National Guild for Community Arts Education (the Guild). The Guild charged ELI with conducting a racial equity assessment based on a variety of data collection and analysis initiatives. These included focus groups; a policy and procedure analysis; a survey; an historical review of racial equity work and programming; and a review of existing documents and data. Based on data collected through these initiatives we analyzed board of trustees and staff experiences with, and perceptions of, the organization as it relates to racial diversity, racial equity, and commitments to racial justice.

In this report we offer our findings divided into two sections: (1) insights into what the Guild is doing well when it comes to racial equity, and (2) areas in which the Guild can improve its racial equity efforts. We then offer recommendations for strengthening organizational efforts for racial equity.

We encourage readers of this report to visit the Equity Literacy Institute web site (<http://www.equityliteracy.org>) to learn about the equity literacy framework, which we used to frame our assessment and the way we describe our findings. Our *basic principles for equity literacy* might be especially helpful in this regard (<http://www.edchange.org/handouts/Equity-Literacy-Principles.pdf>).

### Ways Racial Equity Is Working at the Guild

We identified several examples of positive racial equity efforts in the Guild. The organization should build on these efforts and learn from the people who have led or are leading them.

1. Equity is an explicit core value of the Guild. This is the commitment to which individuals in the organization and the Guild itself can and should be held accountable. We especially note the explicit use of the language, *racial justice*. The question is, to what extent is the Guild accountable to this core value and to what extent do people leading the Guild understand what *racial justice* means in practice?
2. Focus group findings suggest that staff and board members tend to like and respect the people with whom they work. Although this finding is not specifically about racial equity, it does offer an important foundation for people to have hard conversations about racism within the organization. Overall, staff and board members agree that the Guild is making some level of progress on racial equity—that commitments to racial equity are growing and that actions are being undertaken.
3. There are several policies and procedures in place that are attentive to matters of equity, including the “pay what you can” model for organizations with budgets under \$300,000. (*Editor's note, November 2020: in April 2020, the "pay what you can" pricing model was extended to all organizations regardless of budget in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.*)

4. Many board and staff members at the Guild have considerable levels of racial equity expertise and a willingness to challenge the organization's norms and policies. It is important that leadership see these members as core organizational assets and reward the risks they take to push the organization forward.
5. The Racial Equity Committee is an active and passionate group, the members of which collectively appear determined to guide the organization toward a serious racial equity commitment. Although the content knowledge and levels of urgency among people on the Committee vary, our overall sense is that it can provide important direction to the organization. It is unclear what power the Committee has when it comes to modifying the Guild's organizational culture, policies, or practices. The Racial Equity Committee "Charge" document contains critical goals, not just for the committee, but for the overall organization. Especially important is the charge to develop a course to disrupt racial inequity in the Guild. We note the directness of this charge and encourage the whole organization to revisit it on occasion to ensure the Committee has the power and resources to respond to it fully.
6. There is a strong level of consensus among trustees and staff that the Guild ought to continue prioritizing racial equity in its operations. Our analysis suggests that there may be gaps in what people perceive *prioritizing racial equity* means, but the overall sense of enthusiasm for racial equity efforts is a notable asset.
7. Board and staff members on average are comfortable speaking up about racial equity issues, suggesting at least the hope of ongoing discussions and accountability when something happens that does not reflect the organization's stated commitment to racial justice.
8. Some of the Guild's efforts, such as engaging with professional learning around racial equity and incorporating racial equity sessions into its events, demonstrate a notable step, at least at the programmatic level. We note, in particular, that the racial equity related sessions at the annual conferences are growing in sophistication and racial justice directness when compared to the sorts of sessions that were offered just five or six years ago. This can—*must*—be seen as a way to create momentum for more significant organizational change.

### Areas for Racial Equity Improvement at the Guild

Data analysis also uncovered several opportunities for the Guild to strengthen its racial equity efforts.

1. There are considerable gaps in perceptions regarding how equitable the Guild presently is. Some staff and board members see the Guild as a model of racial equity while others see (and experience) significant concerns. In fact, some survey respondents were emphatic in their short answer responses that there are no racial equity issues at the Guild. This could suggest a lack of racial equity literacy on the parts of some staff and board members, or perhaps an inability or
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unwillingness to recognize how racism operates in subtle ways through institutional culture, norms, policies, and interpersonal interactions. This is a notable area for improvement for a couple reasons. First, the lack of racial equity literacy can affect people's abilities to perform their Guild-related work equitably. Secondly, it creates the potential that some people might invalidate the experiences of those who are experiencing racism in the organization, contributing to racial battle fatigue for staff and board members of color.

2. One of the discernible perception gap patterns falls along racial identity. It appears that, *on average*, white people on the staff and board had more difficulty discussing racial inequities or accepting that these were operating systemically in the Guild. According to survey data, staff and board members of color were less likely than white participants to see the Guild as prioritizing racial equity, to feel affirmed as a person at the Guild, to see staff and board members generally as racially conscious, to think of the Guild as an antiracist organization, to consider the Guild's leadership to be committed to racial equity, to think of the organization's staff and board as racially diverse, and to feel comfortable speaking up about racial equity. Although there is a general consensus that the Guild ought to continue its racial equity emphasis, what people are willing to support in action is usually driven by their perceptions of the problem to be resolved, so this perception gap is both philosophical and very practical.
3. This gap in perception may be connected to the concern shared by some Guild staff and board members of color that many of the organization's equity efforts are cosmetic or mechanical and do not get to the roots of racial inequity. Some appear to see the Guild as an antiracist organization simply because it is doing *something* about racial equity, which may suggest a lack of understanding about what it means to be an antiracist organization or a racial equity leader within the arts education world.
4. There is a general consensus that the Guild's staff and upper-level leadership lack adequate racial diversity in part because of organizational difficulties retaining people of color. A common theme in the short answer portion of the survey was the pattern of replacing people of color who have left by promoting internal white candidates, exacerbating this problem.
5. Many participants reported witnessing or experiencing racial microaggressions and other subtle forms of racism within the Guild, particularly from positional leaders. For example, staff of color report feeling that their ideas and concerns are not heard unless funneled through white men with more power in the organization.
6. Staff and trustees of color expressed concerns regarding how member organizations that are predominately comprised of people of color often are asked for support and labor for Guild events but then left without support or real connection afterward.

7. Racial microaggressions and bias are not addressed adequately when experienced within the Guild. The general perception seems to be that this is the result of a sense that there is not sufficient time to address them or that the understandings and mechanisms to address them do not exist in the organization. This indicates that racial equity in practice is not a priority in the day to day operations of the organization. Some people of color in the Guild do not trust their concerns will be addressed adequately if they do name the microaggressions they experience. Some white people in the organization do not recognize microaggressions or feel knowledgeable or skilled enough to address them adequately. The result often is that people of color feel that they must keep raising these concerns despite not trusting the organization to respond in a reasonable way. As we mention in the Recommendations, white staff members and trustees should receive training to learn how to recognize and address these issues more thoroughly rather than relying on the emotional labor of people of color to do so.

## Recommendations

1. Our assessment is that the Guild's board and staff will benefit from ongoing professional learning related to racial equity with a particular emphasis on (a) subtle ways institutional racism operates in what might be considered "liberal" organizations and (b) what it means to be (and to work for) an actively antiracist organization.
2. Due to perception gaps across race, we recommend specific professional learning for white board and staff members on whiteness and how white supremacy informs racial perceptions. More generally, because we find a significant range in racial equity literacy, we suggest offering different levels of professional learning for people based on their awareness level. This will help tailor learning and allow people with deeper levels of understanding to have opportunities for deeper learning so that they can lead the organization forward while other board and staff members who are just beginning to learn about these issues are being bridged to deeper levels of understanding. We found, for example, that white trustees have a harder time identifying and articulating inequitable policies and practices in the Guild even if they have a general sense that such policies and practices exist. We also noted a level of white fragility, as white trustees discussing these concerns tended to focus on their own discomfort or lack of knowledge and skills. This is a common response for white people testing the waters of racial equity, but it also can paralyze organizations that need to take antiracist action. Generally, we found that white staff were able to articulate concerns about racial bias in policies and operations, or to acknowledge their existence, but struggled to name specific examples. People who are not equipped to clearly identify racism cannot be antiracist. At the same time, the need among some staff and trustees for this level of learning should not slow the organization's progress if others are ready for that progress now. Differentiated professional learning is one solution to this set of conditions.

3. We also recommend specific professional learning for positional leaders in the organization. This should focus on a robust understanding of institutional and interpersonal racism and how to lead deep, transformative, racial equity change.
4. The Guild should undertake a process to review hiring procedures. A particular focus of that process should be consideration for efforts to diversify hiring at all levels of the organization, but especially for leadership and other decision-making position. This should be undertaken only *along with* other efforts to strengthen racial equity in the organization rather than *as* the primary racial equity effort. What are the aspects of institutional culture that have resulted in an organization that claims a commitment to racial equity becoming less racially diverse? The aforementioned professional learning could equip people with this understanding.
5. Expand racial equity assessment efforts, or undertake an additional assessment initiative, to identify the conditions underlying the Guild's difficulty retaining leaders of color. This might include interviewing former leaders of color.
6. During the upcoming visioning and planning process, the Guild should identify clear and transformative racial equity goals and map those goals onto the Guild's mission. One focus for leadership should be how to be *intentional* and *transformative* in racial equity thinking and action. When it comes to racial equity, the first level of accountability must be leadership holding itself accountable.
7. Review policies and practices with a racial equity lens and adjust what needs to be adjusted to ensure equity. The Racial Equity Committee can be an important resource in this process, which should be undertaken by the people with the most knowledge and experience with racial equity. The people who do not share that level of expertise must defer to the people with the expertise so that racial equity efforts are led by the people most knowledgeable about racial equity.
8. Reimagine the Guild's [Code of Best Practices](#) to be more actively antiracist. We believe this is one place the Guild can transition from imagining itself as a *nonracist* organization to forming itself as *antiracist*. Notice, for example, how passive the "accessibility practices" are. The Guild won't discriminate. It will mitigate injustice by offering aid. These are equality and inclusion practices but, based on our understanding of equity, fall short of equity and justice practices. How can the Guild more actively address racism and prioritize the interests of individuals and communities experiencing and resisting racism?
9. The CEO search should include an explicit focus on racial equity knowledge and skills. Antiracist organizations hire antiracist leaders. We recommend constructing the hiring committee to ensure that it includes people who know what questions to ask in order to assess applicants' antiracist knowledge, skills, and commitments, and who know how to interpret applicants' responses. The Guild might consider contracting with the Equity Literacy Institute or another organization for support on this matter. The Racial Equity Committee also will be an important resource.

10. Make the Racial Equity Committee a standing committee. This might give the Committee more power, but it also would make a statement about the organization's level of long-term commitment.
11. Add a demonstrated commitment to racial equity to the "[General Responsibilities of Board Members](#)." People without an antiracist commitment should not have a pathway onto the board of an antiracist organization.
12. Continue to strengthen and expand racial justice session offerings at the Guild's annual conference. We noted earlier an improvement in this area when comparing sessions from five or six years ago to sessions from the last couple years. This is a positive trend. We encourage the Guild to continue this progress. It is commendable to encourage people whose organizations already are affiliated with the Guild to offer these sessions. We recommend that the Guild also consider inviting people with demonstrated expertise in racial justice who might otherwise not attend the conference to present at future meetings in order to continue deepening the conversation. The Guild also might consider offering member organizations a series of webinars or other professional learning opportunities related to racial justice between conferences.

## Conclusion

The Guild has as much potential as any organization with which we have ever worked to make tremendous strides toward racial equity. In fact, the Guild has the tools necessary to become a model for what an antiracist membership organization can be. The measure of progress comes down to (1) the will to make hard decisions that may rub against "the way things are," (2) the willingness to seek out the supports needed to add layers of depth to its equity commitments, (3) an ongoing commitment to professional learning toward a deep, transformational vision for racial equity, and (4) the willingness to make serious changes to policies, procedures, structure, and institutional culture in support of that vision. The Equity Literacy Institute looks forward to continuing to support the Guild's progress in these areas.