

# GEO Member Story



Massachusetts Cultural Council

## *How the Massachusetts Cultural Council is strengthening the cultural sector in Massachusetts as a whole through its Cultural Investment Portfolio*

Four years ago, before the Cultural Investment Portfolio launched, panelists at the Massachusetts Cultural Council sorted through piles of paper grant applications that were then scored and ranked in order to whittle down to those who would eventually receive funding.

This process was problematic for two main reasons. One, how does an organization realistically communicate artistic excellence in a paper form? Two, no matter how much the panelists try to take context into account, how could it ever be fair to compare smaller arts organizations to a giant like the Boston Symphony Orchestra?

If the MCC was going to strengthen the cultural sector as a whole in the state, then it was time to assess how to do things differently to increase effectiveness.

The MCC was already on the right path; it was offering multiyear support, and it was an early adopter in Massachusetts for providing general operating support to grantees. However, the MCC's executive director, Anita Walker, knew the council could do more as a funder.

The MCC consulted with focus groups across the state, asking nonprofits about what they valued and how things could be improved upon. The nonprofits shared that they appreciated the figurative “seal of approval” that came with being selected as an MCC grant recipient and how that could be leveraged for more funding. Predictably, grantees also shared a common dislike for the panel-review process, particularly when the panel was made up of individuals from outside the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

As the Cultural Investment Portfolio — the name given to the restructured program — was being developed, the MCC knew it wanted to keep the positive aspects of flexibility, endorsement and consistency that grantees appreciated, plus be able to demonstrate a public value to the citizens of Massachusetts. The council also wanted grantees to see themselves as part of something bigger, a coalition of cultural organizations across Massachusetts.

With this in mind, the MCC performed three main changes to the program:

- Instituting a formula funding model that increased transparency
- Establishing a site visit protocol that built stronger relationships
- Replacing written reports with the Cultural Data Project

The MCC included about 400 organizations already receiving funding from the council in the first four-year cycle of the Cultural Investment Portfolio — a decision that both eased the competitive relationships among grantees and saved time for the council and grantees by bypassing the application process.

## Formula Funding

Nonprofits shared that the MCC's previous process for awarding grants, with its panels and lack of transparency, hindered relationship building between the council and grantees and resulted in a clear hierarchy of power. In response, the MCC made its funding process more transparent.

The council established a formula for how grants are awarded, based on a nonprofit's operating budget and the amount of funding that the Massachusetts legislature appropriates to the MCC. For grantees it is no longer a mystery how funding amounts are decided for grants.

It also became very easy for grantees to see the direct relationship between their successes and increasing funding from the legislature for the MCC, Walker said.

"Everybody could see it and feel it, and that fired up their enthusiasm this year to advocate for an even bigger budget for the MCC," she said.

---

## Site Visit Protocol

All grantees in the MCC's Cultural Investment Portfolio are expected to host a site visit, and each organization's executive director is also expected to go on two site visits during the course of the four-year cycle.

The site visits include meeting with an organization's staff, board members, and community beneficiaries. Hearing about organizations' impact in the words of community members can be a particularly moving experience, Walker said.

Through this process, a number of collaborations and networks have emerged that would not have otherwise surfaced, particularly as grantees have gone to site visits at organizations with different disciplines.

Walker said that the MCC also makes it abundantly clear that what's shared at a site visit will not affect an organization's grant amount. This helps grantees open up and be more honest about their work.

"The fact that the MCC has disconnected funding from the site visit protocol has completely changed our relationship with organizations," Walker said, adding that the visits have allowed her to also find new opportunities to help organizations address issues of sustainability, such as facilitating important conversations between executive directors and board members. Getting to know the board members of grantee organizations has been a particularly valuable result of the site visits, she said.

As the MCC participates in site visits, its staff members pay close attention to lessons and successful trends they may discover, and they make it a point to share these trends and lessons among their grantees.

## Cultural Data Project

In lieu of creating written reports for the MCC, the council asks organizations in the Cultural Investment Portfolio to participate in the Cultural Data Project

The CDP enables arts and cultural organizations to enter financial, programmatic and operational data into a standardized online form that can be used for grant applications for multiple grantmakers. In Massachusetts, the MCC teamed up with three foundations (two of which are GEO members) to support the Massachusetts Cultural Data Project.

The CDP also allows organizations to track their own financial and programmatic performance over time and to benchmark themselves against comparable organizations in specific disciplines, geographic regions and budget sizes. Organizations can generate 79 different reports about themselves using the CDP.

---

Even while the dollar amount of the MCC's grants may be relatively small, Walker said the Cultural Investment Portfolio has allowed the MCC to have a significant impact among Massachusetts' cultural organizations.

"We've been doing it long enough that it's not speculative. We've been seeing the results," she said. "I'm really excited about it because for me it's really what grantmaking should be about. It should be about building successful organizations, and successful organizations focus on public value and collaboration, and I think the Cultural Investment Portfolio has really been successful at that."

---

To find out more about the Massachusetts Cultural Council, visit its website at [www.massculturalcouncil.org](http://www.massculturalcouncil.org)

Specifically, you can [read about the Cultural Investment Portfolio by clicking here](#).

GEO members who are interested in having a conversation with Anita Walker to learn more about the MCC and the Cultural Investment Portfolio can [email her by clicking here](#).

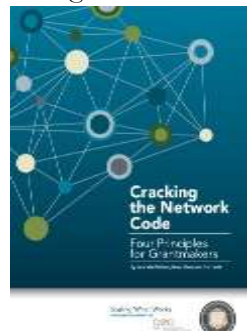
---

## GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight

### *Pathways to Grow Impact*



### *Cracking the Network Code*



### *Widespread Empathy*

