

# CYCLICAL MENTORSHIP IN ARTS EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

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**Insights from Emerging and Veteran Leaders**



**A CONVERSATION BETWEEN**

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**NICOLE AMRI AND TAMARA MOZAHUANI ALVARADO**



**AMERICANS  
for the  
ARTS**

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# ABOUT & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## **About Americans for the Arts**

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The mission of Americans for the Arts is to serve, advance, and lead the network of organizations and individuals who cultivate, promote, sustain, and support the arts in America.

Founded in 1960, Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts and arts education. From offices in Washington, DC and New York City, we provide a rich array of programs that meet the needs of more than 150,000 members and stakeholders. We are dedicated to representing and serving local communities and to creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts.

## **About the Arts Education Program**

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The Arts Education Program provides leadership development, networking, research, and tools that empower individuals and organizations to create equitable systems and strong policies which strengthen the arts education ecosystem. We seek to unify diverse stakeholders, including arts education professionals, cultural and education sector leaders, the business community, parents, and young people, to create change in their communities, states, and the nation.

## **About the Emerging Leaders Program**

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The Emerging Leaders Program identifies and cultivates the next generation of arts leaders in America. Through professional development and peer networking opportunities on the national and local levels, members contribute their enthusiasm, creativity, and potential to strengthening the arts in America and building the next generation of arts leaders.

## **Acknowledgements**

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# INTRODUCTION

Arts education programs nationally are challenged to serve an ever-diversifying student population. As trends in the field of arts education are maturing to reflect demographic shifts, leaders of these programs must facilitate meaningful and comprehensive succession planning to prepare the next generation of leaders in this important sector.

Unfortunately, while established and robust arts learning programs emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, **leadership in the field still does not adequately reflect youth served or communities in which the programs operate.** The challenges faced by these organizations could be aided by leveraging the strategies employed throughout the field of arts administration to diversify and broaden the leadership pipeline, empowering future leaders while simultaneously honoring and harnessing the great work of current leadership. These strategies can and should be explored to promote intergenerational dialogue and cyclical mentorship among arts education leaders.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

As the population of students served continues to change and grow in their challenges, needs, and demography, research shows that national organizations—such as Americans for the Arts—have a responsibility to broaden the leadership pipeline and build future leaders through intergenerational dialogue. A community-based participatory approach to research should be taken to connect youth, emerging and mid-career leaders (adults), and veterans (adult elders) to leverage effective strategies to honor community differences and develop sustainable missions. Among others, the higher education and nonprofit sectors have led strategic investments in capacity building of multi-generational teams for purposes of fostering dialogue to engage the next generation of leaders in a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable way.

In 2017, Americans for the Arts conducted research to illuminate effective practices of emerging and seasoned leaders in the field of arts education. The research was intended to inform the development of programming to assist in cyclical mentorship, intergenerational dialogue, and to support the broadening and diversifying of the pool of new leaders in the arts education field.

Research was led by emerging leaders and supported by mid-career and veteran staff and was deployed in a community-based, participatory manner. Researchers used a form of simultaneous storytelling and data gathering with participants to gather perspectives and generate authentic discussion. The following documented interviews are transcripts of the dialogues.

“You will be the very best at what you do when you build relationships one at a time”

Jean Tokuda Irwin,  
Arts Education Program Manager,  
Utah Division of Arts & Museums

## FINDINGS

The overall findings from the research were grouped in several categories ranging from transformative moments in leaders' own development to suggestions for tackling systemic barriers to equitable leadership development.

Participants shared anecdotes about their times of growth and moments of challenge as leaders in the arts education field. For some, this moment of success was with an effective mentor and for others it was overcoming a systemic barrier challenging their race or socio-economic status.

All participants felt that systemic barriers impede the development of diverse leaders in the pipeline. They offered solutions such as shifts in the culture of internships, payment structures, certifications or inclusion of alternative qualifications, and changing certain aspects of the culture of arts or educational leadership.

Additionally, participants believed in the power to grow and change as emerging, mid-career, or veteran leaders through professional learning and leadership skill development. Suggestions included: building stronger relationships among broad swaths of individuals, engaging in inquiry-based research and management, developing a more 'facilitated' leadership style, and mobilizing your own practice as a student of your surroundings.

In a session held at the 2017 Americans for the Arts' Annual Conference, the topic of **'cyclical mentorship'** was proposed for consideration in a participatory session discussing the future of arts education leadership. This proposed cycle of mentorship begins as young people are mentored by adult arts educators, emerging leaders are mentored by both elders and youth, and elders are mentored by both emerging leaders and youth. This concept engages the broad concepts of intergenerational dialogue and artistic skill development to engage each other in shared learning and to have shared responsibility for the future of our field by way of the pipeline built to enhance leadership.

The following case study will highlight perspectives on these broad themes and is intended to inform and inspire emerging, mid-career, and veteran leaders to engage in this work.



### Emerging Leader in Arts Education

## NICOLE AMRI

PROGRAM DIRECTOR, SAY SÍ

Nicole Amri is a 2006 alumna of SAY Sí and a 2012 graduate from the University of Texas at San Antonio with a BFA in Painting and a BA in Communication: Public Relations. She is also a certified nonprofit professional through the Nonprofit Leadership Alliance. Driven by learning and creating, Nicole's great passions are education and the arts. As a multidisciplinary artist she explores human rights issues with a focus on interpersonal relationships and societal conditions. In

addition to her position as Program Director for SAY Sí, Nicole currently serves on local and national committees such as city-wide collective impact initiatives: SA2020 and Excel Beyond the Bell SA and national groups: the ALAANA Network of the National Guild for Community Arts Education and the National Advisory Committee to the Creative Youth Development National Partnership. When she's not working or creating, Nicole loves to dance, cook and listen to music (often at the same time).



### Veteran Leader in Arts Education

## TAMARA MOZAHUANI ALVARADO

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SCHOOL OF ARTS & CULTURE  
AT THE MEXICAN HERITAGE PLAZA

Prior to serving as the Executive Director for the School of Arts & Culture at the Mexican Heritage Plaza, Tamara was the Director of Multicultural Leadership for 1stACT Silicon Valley. From 2003 to 2008 she served as Executive Director of MACLA/Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana in San Jose, California. From 1999 – 2003 she served as Program Director for the newly opened Washington United Youth Center, a partnership between

Catholic Charities and the City of San Jose. She is a member of the Board of Trustees of the Western State Arts Federation. Tamara is also co-founder of the Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute, a leadership development program for people of color working in arts, culture, and entertainment. A traditional Aztec dancer for the past 14 years, she is a member of Calpulli Tonalehqueh Danza Azteca of San Jose. Tamara holds a Bachelor's Degree in Spanish Literature from Stanford University.

## **Q:** Please reflect on a transformative moment for you as an arts education leader from a mentor or mentee.



**NICOLE:** I was thinking about transformative moments but I'm not sure if you noticed but I'm an alum of the program that I work for—so I was introduced to arts education, as far as the community is concerned, when I was 15.

One of our core values here at SAY Sí is reciprocal learning so at 15, I walked into a studio where, for the first time, I was invited to speak to - who I assumed was my expert in the room, my mentor, my teaching artist—by their first name, and I think that sort of opened the doors and changed the dynamic for me as far as who you learn from and things like that. I think that everything I've experienced at SAY Sí since and everything that I seek to instill in others comes from these moments of “I'm not lesser than you because I'm younger than you—I might have less experience but you respect me as a peer, as a colleague, as an up and coming artist and eventually, leader.” So coming from a program like mine, reciprocal learning specifically is what built my leadership path.



**TAMARA:** That's cool, I really like what you said about being able to call people by their first names. It's a big deal because sometimes, culturally, we're taught not to call people by their first names especially if they're older and so it's one of those funny things where you're like, “oh, do I go by what my culture dictates or this work environment?”

Alright, I'll share: two moments for me. Two elders asked me to co-found the Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute with them when it was just an idea—but they specifically brought me in because I was younger than them and they valued a younger perspective and they knew they were older. So, they came to me and said, “we have this idea and we want to push it and see what comes from it”—this was like 10 years ago or more, maybe eleven—and so for me, it was one of those moments where it wasn't necessarily the words “mentor/mentee,” so much as I saw them as my mentors. They were treating me as equals so I thought that was really good. And it was tough, I mean it was definitely hard—it was easy to say yes—but it was hard to make sure that we held each other equally.

Another brief point: I had this interaction with one of our Multicultural Arts Leadership Institute graduates who sat down with me and asked me about advice on a very serious consideration. Like, should I step out of my full-time job to start-up my own for-profit arts business? And I was just like, “you want my advice on this? Oh okay. Well....isn't this about your income? Doesn't this affect you in a big way?” This wasn't like low-level stuff—it was a “I'm willing to take a risk and I want your input” and I felt like, “oh okay, this is what it feels like to be a mentor.” People take you seriously and they're going to ask you really tough questions that you have to be both mindful of them and other important factors.

## Q: How does cultural specificity intersect with our work in developing the next generation of leaders in arts education? Are there systemic barriers to leadership within the field of arts education? What is one suggestion on how we might tackle it?



**TAMARA:** What I've seen is that there are challenges—if we're gonna talk within the nonprofit arts education sector and if we're gonna be very specific around leadership and we're going to talk about executive level type leadership or executive team type leadership, I think one of the challenges is the make-up of a lot of arts education organizational boards. And if you're looking for a certain profile or culture fit, then often that might not necessarily mean a) someone who's younger b) someone who's a person of color and sometimes neither someone who's younger or a person of color. So there are, I think, whole groups, of course, that have boards that are diverse but I think that they are diverse in both age, thinking, and ethnicity but I think that one of those systematic barriers is that if you have boards upon boards that are all within the same age bracket and all are the same ethnicity then that's gonna be tough when you say, well, maybe they're not interested—they're looking for someone that looks like them. You know, that's one of the thoughts that I've had.



**NICOLE:** So, when I read the question about systemic barriers, of course—I think of the real institutional racism and sexism and classism and ultimately, fear. And so, I think, as far as suggestions for tackling those and the rest of the questions—it's about changing the culture of leadership. So really, the idea of changing the culture of what artistic leaders can do means that we could potentially change the way businesses run and the way managerial systems of mentoring work—meaning breaking the hierarchal systems that we're used to from decades of work, from places we don't really identify with anymore. It doesn't really make sense for us anymore.

You know, we're the arts and we think that innovation should be key and a courage to change the way we do things is something we need to instill in our leaders, and so for me, working in creative youth development, of course to me—it's always about the youth, they're the next generation. But my partners and experts and people on this call, people in the national networks, they need to work with emerging leaders and leaders who are ready to get on the next level and change the way they've been thinking or doing things for the last ten, fifteen, twenty years, maybe longer. An idea of breaking ego and movement building, really learning brand new—from scratch—what social justice can look like in an organizational turnover: from the way they hire people, to the way they write their by-laws, and the way they train their board...or IF they train their board. I think there's a lot of room for innovation and the way we handle our nonprofits, handle our community-based organizations, handle our businesses as far as the structure of leadership and the philosophy behind leadership.



The last thing I would talk about—I think you mentioned a question about cultural specificity—I think that goes hand in hand when talking about movement building. We’re talking about leaders who lead through the lens of social justice. This creates room for healing, there’s room for sharing and being heard which I think is happening in some national movements but we could really take it head-on. I think that’s where we gotta go if we’re looking for, essentially, evolution of humankind and thinking, we’re talking about this field doing a lot of that work to fill in to the sciences and medicine and business, etc.



**TAMARA:** For sure, for sure. You’re talking about things on like a macro level in terms of like pushing people who are part of movements—local, regional, national movements—to have these conversations and I think what resonates most with me is the need to be seen and heard and that’s one of the pieces where it’s like “okay well how do you break that down into a day-to-day practice?” Right? There’s practices and then there’s systematic barriers like one of the recent reports that came out, I think it’s called Racing to the Top, but basically the premise is that people of color need to be equipped with the tools to succeed in the nonprofit sector and this report came out and basically says, they are equipped. They actually (based on this survey which is close to 5,000 people, not everyone in the universe) ARE equipped: that they do have degrees, they do have training, that it’s not for lack of training so much as that when it comes time to hit that top post in a very hierarchical fashion, that people of color aren’t getting those positions.

So, it’s really not about a lack of training anymore and so that’s when—referring to boards and executive leadership of organizations where everybody looks the same and is primarily white—if you don’t already have that built-in diversity then it’s going to be really tough to find your way. Never mind there was a whole percentage (again only 5,000 people surveyed) of people of color that were not interested in the nonprofit arts sector period (something like 21-22%).

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**Q:** Do you have advice for future leaders in the field of arts education?  
What is your hope for the future of leadership in arts education?



**NICOLE:** I guess things that I tell my youth, but I would really say to anybody regardless of their age or station in their career: Be honest. That’s hard—you can get all the training in the world but the choice to be honest is very personal and is based on values. I think, if you can be honest with everything you do (with what’s in front of you, what’s working, what’s not, your own mistakes, what you know, what you don’t) it’s going to guide you on where to find what you need (how people help you, how people connect you and trust you and essentially, at the end of the day, you want your whole community to be helping you do the work because the work of a leader in the arts field).



As an arts educator we are doing that work with no budget and people questioning the value of your field, so it's okay not to know everything. Just always want to learn and remember you're always teaching. Personally, I let others lead and I watch them so that I can help them become my partners.



**TAMARA:** In terms of advice and hope and things of that nature, I would say that it's really important for any arts leader whether it's in arts education or presenting other parts of the sector that you have a volunteer outlet that is not in the arts. I'll use, as an example, my own volunteering on two different boards over the last 17-18 years at two different charter school organizations: it has been a thing that has really helped me think differently about things, it helps me exercise different parts of my brain that are not exercised in our sector and of course, I bring a different perspective that my colleagues at that table don't have.

It's also a place where I've learned a lot—I've learned about land acquisition, and all this other stuff. It doesn't mean that you wouldn't normally learn about it in an arts setting but I guess in terms of my advice—if you participate and volunteer in things that are outside of your sector, often times—you will be given leadership opportunities that you wouldn't be given in your own sector and so that's something that has given me. I didn't know that that was what was going to happen. I was given leadership opportunities earlier on in my volunteer work than in my formal work employment world and given these responsibilities that I was like, “oh my this is big time, we're gonna purchase a piece of land for a school.”

So that would be my advice: just because we work serving the community doesn't mean that you don't question the service—what are you doing in service? Complete 100% service to the community? Are you serving on some sort of other nonprofit or is it a for profit? I think the idea of service outside of our employment is where there's opportunity to give back and also opportunity to develop your skillset in a way that you may not be seeing at work.

## **Q:** What types of skills do you feel have a long-lasting impact on the development of leadership in your work?



**TAMARA:** I'd say that one of the skills I've gained over time is diplomacy and directness—it has to go hand in hand. You can't be direct and be like “I'm a truth teller, I'm a this, I'm a that.” Well, yeah and after while, you just don't get invited to the party anymore. But at the same time, you also have to have a spine and integrity and maintain your ethics. So I think that what I bring to the table is directness and diplomacy—I'm not gonna say I'm 100% at it. I think that I have the skill and ability to deliver on things that are uncomfortable to say out loud and at the same time be able to create an environment in relation to relationship building where if I'm going to deliver something that's uncomfortable, it's also like “please believe me that I trust that

people's intentions are good and that's everybody's human." So, I'm in no position to be telling people off so much as if we're talking about systematic barriers—yeah I can speak to that and if I'm talking to someone who's in a meeting that's getting really aggressive like I'm gonna call that out and also try to hold them and support them or sometimes ask them to leave.



**NICOLE:** I think the two strainers—filters—that I've gone through were as a student and then becoming a teaching artist. Also college—my first degree is in Public Relations but I'm a visual artist also. I came through SAY Sí and I couldn't afford art school, so I started in PR. I thought that I was going to be a community organizer and do PR for nonprofits and then I just missed making stuff so much that I went back for a BFA. I think the combination of being a creator and a student and a learner and then also having a lens of PR and communication inquiry (the idea that I wanna put myself in your place always and I'm only going to package things the way that I want to consume them) spills over into my leadership. I support an executive director who's been in it for ya know, all of his career as an executive director for a nonprofit and an artistic director and his language sometimes is hard to detect because he wants to help everybody and as a PR person and a teaching artist, I can tack when someone doesn't quite get it or he wasn't quite clear and I come in and fill that gap. When we're asking artists to do more administrative things, my idea is, "well, how do I want to organize this? How do visual learners and tactile learners need to do this boring administrative stuff?" Like, how can I package this and bring them along and have them buy in so I'm thinking of it kind of in a marketing way and I think in the classroom, in community settings, I'm thinking about the consumer or the student and how to share new goals and have them learn in a way that meets them where they are.

## Q: What is the virtue of broadening the leadership pipeline for the field of arts education?



**TAMARA:** I think there's so much work to be done. There's a lot of work to be done and I think that if you broaden the field—the leadership pipeline so to speak—it's also sharing the work and sharing the burden. It makes for an environment where it's just a little bit easier when you know that there are people that you're developing and there are people that are developing you. It decreases isolation.

So, I think that one of those intrinsic values is decreasing isolation by broadening the pipeline and saying, "You know what? If we're truly going to make changes that make significant shifts in society then you know, you have to bring people on board and teach them the ways and have them teach you the ways so you develop new ways of thinking or else this whole piece around arts education just goes by the wayside."

People need arts to live, to survive, to identify what is important to themselves, to know who they are—the arts hold up a mirror—we’ve heard that a million times. It’s not anything I’m saying that’s new, so I think it’s that intrinsic value of sharing the burden and sharing in the possibilities. We can’t continue to put ourselves in the arts and I know that a lot of us are pushing against it and outside of this sort of “arts sector” box. You’ve heard that as a theme throughout my conversation today.

We’re part of society, so when you’re a part of society, then you engage and you bring people in from different sectors that maybe you wouldn’t normally say “oh that’s a leader for arts education.” With that, I conclude my sermon on the mount.



**NICOLE:** Can I just say “ditto, everything she said”? Absolutely, she said it beautifully. I have three things written down: evolution, compassion, and a more equitable world.