



Building Bridges Across the Performing Arts Presenting Field:  
Muslim Arts and Culture as a Catalyst for Change

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“We live in a country where we’re not allowed to have conversation anymore – you’re either on this side of the spectrum or that side of the spectrum – and we’re just shouting at each other. Building Bridges [APAP’s grants program] is creating a space in which we can have conversation” (Amir Khafagy). Mr. Khafagy, a young Muslim-American residing in New York City, was one of many peers who offered similar sentiments during a “Learning Lab” convened at Georgetown University in November 2018 for participants of the Association of Performing Arts Professionals (APAP) [Building Bridges: Arts, Culture, and Identity](#) (Building Bridges) grants program, funded by the [Doris Duke Charitable Foundation](#) (DDCF) and [Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Arts](#) (DDFIA).

As an outgrowth of APAP’s [Creative Campus](#) grants program, Building Bridges was designed collaboratively with DDCF/DDFIA for campus and community-based presenters to help their community - especially young people – learn more about Muslims in contemporary society through direct experience with artists who have roots in Muslim-majority cultures. The Building Bridges grants were funded for two cycles (2012-2015 and 2016-2019) for a combined total of \$4,680,000.

What is the value for the arts presenting field of this significant investment of time and resources? Why is it important for presenters to bring together diverse marginalized groups within their communities? How is this best accomplished? APAP’s Building Bridges grantees have demonstrated that engaging artists with backgrounds from other cultures (in this case, Muslim artists) leads to constructive intercultural community partnerships. This paper will focus on what the author perceives to be key lessons learned from across the thirteen projects comprising APAP’s Building Bridges grants program, grouped as follows: understanding the intersection of faith, identity, and community through the arts; empowering the creative voice and energy of youth; catalyzing the voice and inspiration of Muslim artists, transforming communities through arts-based civic engagement, and measuring the impact of this work.

### Understanding the Intersection of Faith, Identity, and Community Through the Arts

Why should arts presenters learn more about the origins, complexity and contributions of Muslim-majority world cultures across the United States? Mr. Khafagy’s comment (above) underscores the ever-growing heated controversy and conflict in many American communities



around immigration policy and social justice. The growth of anti-immigrant rhetoric and stereotypical thinking has contributed to implicit bias and hate crimes against Muslim-Americans, as well as others from immigrant societies. This threatens the cultural vitality of the diverse communities we serve.

Although Americans have faced the challenges of combating bias against feared or hated groups throughout our country's history, the rise of Islamophobia, particularly against Muslims, has evolved rapidly since 9/11, according to many recent studies. The Pew Research Center's video, "[Being Muslim in the U.S.](#)" provides a summary of public views about Muslims, based upon data from a [2017 survey](#), as well as the personal stories of Muslims from across the United States. There is also evidence that Americans lack general knowledge about the contributions of Muslims to American society, which is parodied in the animated video, "[The Secret History of Muslims in the U.S.](#)" (developed with support from DDFIA in collaboration with the New York Times).

DDFIA asked APAP to design the Building Bridges grants program to demonstrate how presenters can help their community, especially young people, increase knowledge and change attitudes about Muslims through direct experience with Muslim artists. Applicants for APAP's second round of Building Bridges grants applied in 2015 and began their projects in 2016, at the height of a cycle of anti-Muslim sentiment. In 2018 and 2019, President Trump's Muslim Ban dominated stories about Muslim-influenced communities and cultures. In April, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments for the Muslim Ban case, and in June, issued its ruling to uphold the ban. This was a difficult time for Muslim, Arab, and South Asian communities, who faced ignorance, hostility and threats from both government and community entities – and the environment in which the second cohort of Building Bridges grantees conducted their programming.

In addition to national politics and actions affecting how we feel about and engage with Muslims and Muslim communities in America, Building Bridges grantees learned that other barriers exist. They found differences among faculty, students and community leaders, in their perceptions about "Muslim culture" and "Islamic culture" regarding faith, cultural practice, and global socio-political issues. The above was evidenced by challenges encountered within steering committees around the theme and focus of their Building Bridges program. Hussein Rashid, one of seven advisors tapped by APAP to monitor and assist Building Bridges grantees, noted that as much as higher education teaches against racism and phobia, different language is used across departments and structural change is needed. For example, a faculty member from the Religious Studies department departed one project's steering committee because he objected to not including the word "Islam" in the project title. It quickly became clear to Building Bridges committees that Muslim society is not a monolith – project content and



context must accommodate the complexity of beliefs and practice of all who identify as Muslim.

Discussion among project leaders and advisors during APAP' Building Bridges Learning Labs validated the importance of building consensus and trust among project partners to shape positive and constructive ways of understanding and responding to Muslim complexities. They observed that the first impulse in response to a traumatic event (e.g. 9/11, the current border crisis, school shootings, etc.) has by far too many, been, to create narratives of fear around a specific race or culture perceived to be responsible.

The Building Bridges approach is constructed on building knowledge and understanding through a narrative frame, rather than a combative one, that connects past to present, and in the process, shapes positive changes in attitudes and behavior for moving forward.

Georgetown University's [Laboratory for Global Performance and Politics](#) (the Lab), an APAP Building Bridges first-round grantee, designed many opportunities to explore narrative frames during their project, *Myriad Voices: A Cross-Cultural Performance Festival*. Students participated in the creation of new work with leading artists from Syria, the Sudan, Iraq, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, and Egypt, accompanied by interdisciplinary dialogues for campus and community audiences. Such activities met the project's mission "to expand the Georgetown and D.C. communities' knowledge and experience of Muslims – their faith, history, politics, and culture ... and to expose and call into question prevalent stereotypes."

For example, *Myriad Voices* produced and presented "Amrika Chalo (Destination: USA) / Politics, Comedy, and the Dangers of Satire" with Ajoka Theatre - a play that satirized US-Pakistan relations, poking fun at both sides. Georgetown students were involved in all aspects of the production, which created rich opportunities for forging personal connections with the Pakistani cast members. The Lab used "Amrika Chalo" to engage real issues around US-Pakistan relations, with introductions by the Pakistani Ambassador and a State Department official, and post show discussions by leading Pakistan analysts at Georgetown and beyond. During this residency, the attack at the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris took place, prompting a panel discussion "Politics, Comedy, and the Dangers of Satire" to better understand the atrocious event's implications. The panel explored the political and ideological context around the capacity of satire and freedom of expression to foster empathy and an appreciation of Muslim identities and cultures.

Although Muslims in the vicinity of Moraine Valley Community College (near Chicago) tend to be mainly from Arabic-speaking countries of the Levant and Jordan, the [Mosaics: Muslim Voices in America](#) project brought artists and work that highlighted the rich diversity of the Muslim



world. The play “American Griot” focused on the role of African Muslims in American history, which drew an audience consisting of the nearby African American Muslim community, as well as the Arab-American Muslim, and African-American Christian communities.

Hancher Auditorium, a second-round grantee, worked with the University of Iowa’s Rhetoric Department to develop a full-semester curriculum and set of à la carte resources to coincide with their project, [Embracing Complexity](#). The goal was to help students embrace the complexity of global citizenry through rhetorical analysis, informed argumentation, and responsible advocacy. They created a curriculum and ready-made online course that launched in the fall of 2017 and was adopted by twenty instructors. *Embracing Complexity* artists engaged with Rhetoric students to share and discuss their stories via class visits and post-show engagements. This example exemplifies the importance of making the connection between Building Bridges programming as a part of core Humanities education, which becomes a leverage point for making sustainable change in the curriculum.

Grantees learned that the ways in which we collectively develop and communicate arts-based program goals and objectives with Muslim and non-Muslim educators, advocates, and potential community partners is critically important to building trust and authentic intercultural learning. APAP tapped the resources of [ReThink](#), a media communications company, to provide Building Bridges grantees with timely assistance and support around communications and messaging in conjunction with project activities. ReThink’s mission is “to provide our member groups and the campaigns we serve with affordable access to state-of-the-art media technologies, communications training, professional media outreach support, reporter intel, strategic messaging advice, and both public opinion and media analysis—and ultimately, to help them win.”

In July 2018, ReThink released a messaging guide, *Dignity, Fairness, and Respect: Messaging to Advance MASA Rights*, based on 2016 message research, more than a year of field-testing, and feedback from frontline communications professionals (MASA is an acronym for Muslim Arab and South Asian communities). This important resource provides information and insights, based upon social psychology and types of audiences, that are useful for avoiding provocative or inaccurate messaging as well as response to controversial challenges or conflict that may arise from presenting Muslim artists or artists from other cultures in your community.

The Somali word for “unity” is “*midnimo*,” which was harnessed as the theme and brand for the Cedar Cultural Center’s [Midnimo](#) project in Minneapolis, beginning in 2012 and re-funded in 2016 as a consortium grant that expanded its focus on Somali communities in Mankato and St. Cloud. The *Midnimo* team found consultation with ReThink to be invaluable. From Cedar’s final report to APAP: “Our collaboration with ReThink was key in helping us to organize a joint press



release with our partners in Mankato and St. Cloud to announce the cancellation of the Aar Maanta residency and raise awareness about the challenges [faced by artists] traveling to the U.S. They also helped us strategize a list of community members to serve as contacts for press, including Representative Ilhan Omar, the highest-elected Somali-American public official in the United States and a significant cultural influencer ... coverage [from a host of local and national media outlets] helped to highlight the impact of *Midnimo*, and helped raise awareness about the obstacles faced by many Somali and refugee artists ... which includes reinforcing misunderstanding of Muslim communities, limiting artistic expression, and increasing discrimination and division.”

Related to the above, Solveig Anderson, *Midnimo*'s partner at the Paramount Center for the Arts in St. Cloud was dismayed by an article that appeared in the [New York Times in June, 2019](#) about a group of St. Cloud-based “white anti-immigration activists [who] have pressed an increasingly explicit anti-Muslim agenda.” Ms. Anderson turned to ReThink for assistance, and together with Paramount’s executive director, Bob Johnson, penned a [response](#) published by the New York Times, which focuses on “a bigger story to be told,” emphasizes Paramount’s goal to build cross-cultural understanding through the arts, and their vision that “art changes people and if we can’t talk to one another, we may find equilibrium through musical experiences ... ultimately it would be our goal for everyone to get along.”

It is important to note that the current anti-immigrant hysteria amidst the Administration’s stand on who is and is not allowed to enter the United States has negatively affected the visa process for bringing artists here from Muslim-majority countries (including artists with Muslim origins who have otherwise resided for many years in countries that are U.S. allies). A useful resource for helping presenters to steer through the process of bringing international artists to the United States is: [Artists from Abroad](#), which was developed by APAP and the League of American Orchestras. This is a comprehensive guide to immigration and tax requirements that includes forms and web links, which highlights latest alerts from the State Department and other sources regarding immigration and visa policies and procedures. The online site is searchable and contents are also available in a complete [PDF version](#).

In addition to seeking help from the above resource, presenters can learn much from each other about the visa and taxation process, as well as the experience of colleagues who have hosted a specific artist of interest. It is important, for example, that presenters understand how cultural roots and practices inherent to the Muslim world may affect typical planning and preparation for hosting Muslim artists. The presenter should request information about basic subsistence needs prior to drafting the agreement for the residency. The above should include such considerations as dietary needs, climate-sensitive apparel (e.g. scarves, gloves, etc.



available for people not used to cold temperatures), language translation if needed, time and space for prayer or solitude related to religious practice, etc.

### Empowering the Creative Voice and Energy of Youth

“Something that I have in common with all first-generation Americans is that, we are caught in between [Arab identity and American identity] – the Building Bridges program puts it out in the open and allows us to talk about it” (Mazin Ibrahim, University of South Florida-Tampa student). Mr. Ibrahim’s comment followed a series of Learning Lab activities led by Derek Goldman, co-director of the Lab (and Georgetown’s *Myriad Voices* project) and former artistic director of the Davis Performing Arts Center with Muslim and non-Muslim students gathered from across APAP’s Building Bridges grant sites. A morning workshop explored such values as openness and empathy, which would be used as the basis for students to work in pairs during the afternoon to prepare a call and response theater piece based on the prompt “when I think about home.”

The Building Bridges program made a difference in giving voice to both Muslim-American youth and their non-Muslim peers, enabling them to deepen their sense of identity in these contentious times.

In general, Building Bridges workshops and discussions between artists and audiences of all ages indicated that a lack of knowledge about global issues, and particularly about societies with origins outside the United States, leads to difficulties in communicating and identifying with people different from oneself. This is especially true between and among American born and bred young people and their Muslim-American peers.

APAP contracted with [WolfBrown](#) to lead a research component during both Building Bridges grant cycles to capture the response of cohorts of students to project activities over the course of academic semesters. The WolfBrown team noted: “For many students, both in the first and second round of projects, the most impactful insights growing out of their engagement with the program was the experience of identifying with a person (or character) from a foreign culture and/or discovering that they were able to enjoy artwork from an unfamiliar cultural tradition.”

Project research teams documented evidence that students who danced and sang with artists or otherwise engaged directly in the creative process, expanded their openness to receive new information and ideas about Muslim cultures and societies. Equally important is the role that self-reflection plays in the development of intercultural sensitivity – that writing about how the experience has affected oneself leads to learning and appreciating the unfamiliar culture. It is important to note that WolfBrown encourages further exploration of the programmatic



interventions with young people and others within the Building Bridges model and how they might be scaled to achieve greater impact.

Stephen Hitt, director of LaGuardia Performing Arts Center at LaGuardia Community College, developed LaGuardia's Building Bridges project, *Beyond Sacred: Voices of Muslim Identity*. Mr. Hitt commissioned Ping Chong & Company to tap the personal aspirations and challenges faced by Muslim-American youth through the development of a theater piece. The process was based on Mr. Chong's ongoing series of theatrical work, under the banner of "undesirable elements," developed and performed with non-actor representatives of groups seen as marginalized in their communities. Five youth, reflecting a range of Muslim identities from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds, spent many hours with the *Chong and Company* team to develop a script based on their personal experiences coming of age in the 9/11 era. The New York Times described "[Beyond Sacred](#)", which, thanks to APAP presenters, has toured to communities across the U.S., as: "A chorus of voices gently demolishing the notion of Muslim culture as monolithic. Beyond Sacred is an exercise in empathy, not polemics: a lesson in human understanding, drawn from real lives."

A "[Beyond Sacred](#)" documentary short includes the following observations by cast members Maha Syed and Tiffany Yasmin Abdelghani: "After 9/11, it all of a sudden becomes that, my face, is the end-all, be-all of my identity – it's the only thing that I am and it's these things that have been portrayed in the media (Ms. Sayed) ... I think it's difficult, because you want to do what the religion requires you to do, and you want to follow the religion and be good, but I feel like people want to judge more when you wear a hijab (Ms. Abdelghani) ... expressing people's narratives and being able to relate to those is going to make a huge difference, I hope, in people's perceptions of Muslims and Muslims in America." (Ms. Sayed) Mr. Hitt reveals: "... the idea of just placing real people on stage and saying, I want to have the opportunity to tell you my story, and let people hear the stories, and then ask questions about it afterwards – that's such a beautiful gift that we can give to the community and to the theater world."

Similarly, The Lab's (Georgetown University) Building Bridges project created an immersive theatrical experience, "[The Generation \(Wh\)Y](#)," from year-long dialogue and encounters between Georgetown students and youth from Egypt, Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Qatar, and Iraq that grew out of the Fall 2014 "Culture and Diplomacy" course taught by Professors Derek Goldman and Cynthia Schneider. The Lab collaborated with LaGuardia's Building Bridges team to include LaGuardia students as part of the performing ensemble.

Hancher Auditorium established a partnership with the Department of International Studies that encouraged Muslim and non-Muslim students to participate in a podcast, part of their



WorldCanvass series. The event included performances and conversations with *Embracing Complexity* visiting artists, project leaders, and the president of the Muslim Students Association. In response to the MSA president's remarks, one student wrote: "The stories the girl told about her struggles as a Muslim- American at the University of Iowa really opened my eyes because I literally sat next to her and talked to her having no idea she was the leader of the group at Iowa and had a great conversation. When I heard her stories, I had a different kind of empathy that made me rethink everything."

Somali musician, Aar Maanta, encouraged project leaders to create opportunities to speak formally and informally with youth during his residencies in Mankato, Minneapolis and St. Cloud. Such [conversations](#) illustrate feelings of alienation among Somali youth and their non-Muslim peers – that adults don't listen or otherwise pay attention to how they think and feel about themselves as individuals. They reflect the importance of developing intergenerational communications opportunities for young people to ask questions and provide input that is listened to and responded to in a respectful way by adults.

*Myriad Voices* project director Derek Goldman, commenting on the Learning Lab workshops, said: "Our approach is that always everyone's voice should be heard. The spirit of call and response reminds us of physical action and core principles of our practice – the power that we have. I hope the seeds of this can help more of us to engage, facilitate, train ... and stay connected as a resource."

Students want and need opportunities to directly assist with planning and implementing programs and activities that build social inclusion and respect for cultural differences in their community. "There's so much research out there that shows when students feel like they're a part of their school and people care about them, you're going to see higher levels of engagement and higher levels of academic success. And hopefully they take that with them, and they take it home to their families, and they take it into the community and share that – right now the United States is not necessarily a very kind place." (Jeff Daline, principal, Mankato East High School) Mr. Daline's comments followed a week-long residency by Aar Maanta with opportunities for students (including Somali youth and their non-Muslim peers together) to create performances and engage in discussions with the artist and his band.

The *Midnimo* team established a goal to develop youth leaders by experimenting with various youth leadership opportunities in collaboration with their partners at Augsburg College. They established a *Midnimo* Youth Leadership Council which participating youth renamed "The Cedar Stars." Led by *Midnimo* artist and audience coordinator, Khadro Mumin, the group helped to curate, plan and host various events on behalf of the Cedar, including plans for the spring 2019 residency with FAARROW (a Canadian-based music duo of sisters born in Magadishu).





In conjunction with the *Embracing Complexity* project, Hancher Auditorium partnered with student groups such as the Muslim Student Association (MSA) early on to develop collaborative activities aimed at student and family engagement. This included hosting MSA's annual EID dinner at the performing arts center, attended by over 650 people, including students and others from the campus and community. A second dinner in the fall of 2018 included many more students. Hancher also partnered with the Persian Student Organization to present documentaries from and about Iran, and activities in conjunction with Hancher's *Feathers and Fire* presentation.

Leaders of Virginia Tech's project, [Salaam: Exploring Muslim Cultures](#), presented pop-up experiences in public spaces to recruit and engage students in art-making opportunities. This included a free outdoor concert by guest artists on an academic quad in September, followed by a seven-week installation about the project in a high-traffic area of the campus library.

The *Embracing Complexity* project staged a reading for students of "Muslims in Iowa" – a documentary theater piece created by Anne Marie Nest (a member of the project steering committee) based on the collected stories of over 50 Muslims living throughout the state of Iowa. One student wrote: "The play surprised me in its showcasing the incredible diversity of lifestyle, opinion, practicing methods, and identity within the Muslim community even in an area so specific as the state of Iowa. I specifically recall hearing both the views of a man who rejected homosexuality as not in line with Islam and the thoughts of a self-identified gay Muslim man. I was shocked at the incredible disparity between their views on the same topic despite both men identifying as Muslim. I was also surprised by the diversity of identity within the Muslim community. This incredible diversity directly opposes what the media paints as a homogenous religion, both in ethnicity and personal belief. This showcasing of diversity truly drove home to me the complexity within the Muslim community."

University of Florida-Tampa's [THIS Bridge](#) project worked with actor-playwright Heather Raffo on two different participatory and in-depth pieces. First, they hosted a developmental residency for "Fallujah", a new opera about the Iraq war (libretto by Raffo, and music by Tobin Stokes) featuring acclaimed Syrian opera singer Lubana Al Quntar, LaMarcus Miller, and six locally-based professional singers. The residency brought together millennials, particularly students in the USF School of Music, with U.S. military veterans. In response to students' fears that it may be too controversial to perform in public, project leader Andrea Assaf arranged a private reading of the libretto with students and the Steering committee (including military leaders, VA therapists, a veteran student leader, USF faculty members of Middle Eastern descent), which deepened their commitment to the project. "Fallujah" received extensive and in-depth media coverage and Ms. Raffo described the residency and process as a "turning



point” for its 2016 premiere at Long Beach Opera.

Coincidentally to “Fallujah”, the USF Theatre chose Ms. Raffo’s acclaimed play, “9 Parts of Desire”, as its Building Bridges mainstage production for Fall 2015. Directed by *THIS Bridge* project director, Andrea Assaf, the original one-woman show was transformed into a sixteen-member ensemble piece (with Ms. Raffo’s permission), in which only two of the actors were Muslim-identified. Students played both Iraqi Muslim characters, and U.S. military characters. Ms. Assaf reported: “Some of the cast members engaged in deep, challenging dialogues with family members because of the content of the show, or because they were playing Iraqi Muslims; and they engaged deeply with each other, particularly around understand their varying religious traditions, prayer rituals, and experiences of racial or religious profiling.”

#### Catalyzing the Voice and Inspiration of Muslim Artists

APAP’s Building Bridges grants and DDFIA’s in-house Building Bridges grants have, for over the past 10 years, helped presenters identify and engage with highly talented and successful Muslim artists. Project directors identified and presented a wide range of highly creative and skilled artists with roots in Muslim-majority countries (many based in the United States as well as artists from abroad). This is in addition to other community-collaborative programs (e.g. NYC’s [Muslim Voices: Arts and Ideas Festival](#)), regional touring programs (e.g. Arts Midwest’s [Caravanserai: A Place Where Cultures Meet](#)), and showcasing opportunities (e.g. NPR’s special series: Muslims, Now), and related organization-based initiatives (e.g. Asia Society’s [Creative Voices of Muslim Asia](#)).

Muslim artists have much to say about their creative roots and inspiration, their identity both as artists and as citizens of the U.S. and the world, and their aspiration for making a positive difference through their art.

Grantees learned that, although not all Muslim artists perceive of their work as a catalyst for social activism or healing, most understand that their passion and ability to speak about their art increases community awareness and acceptance of Muslim societies. The WolfBrown team observed the importance of personal stories presented by the artists: “It may be that the sense of authenticity that was conveyed through these narratives cut through to participants in a way that the superficial and highly mediated portrayals in mainstream media fail to achieve.”

Muslim-American choreographer Amirah Sackett said, during her residency with Moraine Valley’s [Mosaics: Muslim Voices in America](#) project: “*Al Naf* means in Arabic or Islam the self or ego, and this piece is about the struggle of every human to obtain a state of peace within ourselves – and this is a basic concept in Islam and in many religions, so it’s a very universal



theme of bettering one's character ... I'm just representing the human struggle which has been going on and on and on."

Syrian-American hip-hop artist, designer, and poet [Omar Offendum](#), spoke of his experiences during community visits as part of the Virginia Tech residency: "Another powerful moment was when we had the opportunity to connect with some of the recently resettled families, and hearing the stories of fathers, men, from Syria who have just gone through so much these last 5-6-7 years – to be here, to plant roots, and to see their children start to change – become this other culture – that feels very foreign to them but to their children it's starting to become more familiar ... meeting someone like me, for them ... kind of put them at ease to know that somebody could be here for as long as I have and still have this deep longing, love and connection for that part of the world."

Iranian-American musicians Azam Ali and Loga Roman Torkian, the co-creators of [Niyaz](#), who conducted residencies at four Building Bridges campuses, define their purpose as "creating music with a deep social message aimed at uniting people from different cultural and religious backgrounds through our shared humanity" (Ms. Ali). As such they lead workshops and conversations on a variety of issues that, for example during *the Embracing Complexity* (Hancher) residency, included Islam and Sufism; Iranian American Immigration; Feminism in the East; and, Using Technology to Enhance the Arts.

Mr. Torkian spoke about the power of music during the Hancher residency: "Obviously, we are here to communicate and build a bridge – that was really always our intent. It is one of the reasons I became a musician. I came here [from Iran] in 1979 during the hostage crisis. I was 14 years old ... all I could hear was that from where I came from was being hated ... but I loved where I came from and was struggling to find my place here in America ... to some extent I wanted to become a musician – for many reasons – to find a home for myself, to communicate something and to build something that is more beautiful and permanent between people ..."

*Midnimo* project leaders noted that the Somali artists they brought to Minnesota for three week to month-long residences "grappled with some very personal issues [discussing sensitive topics such as being Muslim, God, and spirituality) in a very public manner. They were on stage literally and figuratively with their personal stories, values, and insights helping to influence connectivity between ages, religions, cultures, and perspectives." FAARROW (the Somali sisters duo from Toronto) expressed the pressure they received from agents around re-framing their third-world culture identity for mainstream marketing. In their words: "We didn't choose for a civil war to happen and now we're here trying to find our authentic voice in demonstrating something new about what it means to be African."



Ifrah Monsour, a Somalian-American playwright and performer who resides in Minneapolis, presented her play, “How to have fun in a civil war” as part of the *Midnimo* program in all three communities. Ms. Monsour references pushback that comes from Somali refugee communities around the trauma of forced immigration. She focuses on racial healing in her work and in workshops has created a space safe for mothers to tell their children of their personal trauma for the first time.

Iraqi-American jazz trumpeter and composer Amir ElSaffar [remarked](#): “I guess throughout my life, I feel like I have always been in pursuit of something musically that’s just a little bit beyond me, that’s leading me to want to learn more [about my roots] ... I don’t think any of the students [music students at Hancher] had any exposure ... so sometimes I am thinking ‘is this too exotic? Is it going to be weird? Is somebody going to react negatively to it?’ ... but quite to the contrary, there is a sense that people really embraced and are eager to understand it, and that to me, speaks to the universality of the musical tradition and just music in general.”

To Mr. ElSaffar’s point, a Hancher student wrote: “I thought it was also really interesting and inspiring how his [ElSaffar’s] music unwittingly became a political statement after 9/11 and how he was so affected by that catastrophic event. That event still penetrates our present world with fear and hatred, especially directed towards Muslims and people of Middle Eastern heritage. This is what makes Amir's music so inspiring, hopeful, and important. It's a way of holding hands, of bringing together hurt people into something beautiful, showing peace as it should be. Embracing, understanding, sharing, creating art.”

Direct engagement and support of faculty is also critical to the success of the Building Bridges model. Danielle Haque, at Mankato State University integrated *Midnimo* artists as guests for her Somali Literature classes. She noted: “Meeting artists collapses the distance that students sometimes feel when reading literature or scholarship; it makes concrete what has been for them an abstract encounter with history and art ... Most of my students had only read about Islam or Muslims and had no direct encounter that would challenge the anti-Muslim racism they routinely see in the media and in our political realm. The visit [by FAARROW] challenged many of the assumptions that non-Muslim students have about Islam, particularly with regard to gender and music.”

### Transforming Communities Through Arts-based Civic Engagement

The significant increase of immigrant refugees over recent decades, including many seeking asylum from Muslim-majority countries, has affected many communities served by the arts presenting field. The Building Bridges projects demonstrated ways in which to catalyze new



community partnerships and opportunities to constructively address culturally marginalized populations through the arts – often referred to as “arts-based civic engagement.”

“...we need to recognize the power we have, as public presenters, not only to spark curiosity and inspiration, but also to provide catalysts, entry points, and vocabulary for respectfully bringing members of diverse communities into dialogue.” Anne Elise Thomas, ethnomusicologist and director of the Itraab Music Ensemble at Virginia Tech<sup>1</sup>

Who needs to be at the table and what is the process for accomplishing this? Project leaders for Lafayette College’s Building Bridges project, [Tapestries: Voices Within Contemporary Muslim Cultures](#), identified the need for a well-rounded steering committee that would reach out to the diversity of people on campus and in the Lebanon Valley. The college chaplain and director of spiritual life served as project co-director with the director of arts. Steering committee members included (among others), Williams Center for the Art artistic and executive director, dean of curriculum and research, assistant director of student involvement, faculty from various departments (e.g. religious studies, Africana studies, advising and co-curricular programs) and representatives from the following community organizations: Easton-Phillipsburg Muslim Association, Easton Interfaith Clergy, and Chautauqua at the Forks of the Delaware.

The Muslim Coalition of Connecticut’s president, Aida Monsoor, believed a partnership with Wesleyan’s *Muslim Women’s Voices* would benefit her community and her organization. Ms. Monsoor suggested hosting a workshop with the all-female ensemble, Tari Aceh: Music and Dance from Northern Sumatra, at the Farmington Valley American Muslim Center and limiting it to only female participants. She believed that restricting attendance to only women would allow participants to engage more directly and have an opportunity to dance in the workshop. The successful event drew over 90 women of both Muslim and non-Muslim faiths, and included evening prayer, dinner, showing of a few dances, and a Q&A session. Many of the participants also attended the performance that evening at Wesleyan’s campus. For most of these women, it was their first visit to Wesleyan.

Other Wesleyan project partners included The Pakistani American Association of Connecticut, the Muslim Coalition of Connecticut, Wesleyan Refugee Project, Wesleyan Muslim Student Association, and the Wesleyan Imam Sami Aziz. The Hartford Seminary’s Islamic Studies scholar came to Wesleyan to lecture and have an informal dinner with students, which had special meaning for the female Muslim students on campus.

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Virginia Tech's *Salaam* project team pursued the following scaffolded overarching goals based upon a primary strategy of collaboration:

- Year One: build relationships among Muslims and non-Muslims through collaborative planning, social gathering, music, and story sharing
- Year Two: deepen and share the work through intercultural dialogue, service-learning, and sustained, arts-based engagement among visiting artists and millennial cohort
- Year Three: analyze, synthesize, and share findings; collaborate with local stakeholders, university leaders, and elected officials to catalyze positive community change

The team then recruited representatives from a diverse range of campus and community partners for the following four committees to advance major project components in parallel: Academic Connections, Programming, Engagement & Service Learning, and Documentation & Evaluation. Partners included: Cranwell International Center; VT Departments of History, Urban Affairs and Planning, Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures, and Religion and Culture; Offices of International Research, Education and Development, and, Inclusion and Diversity; Cook Counseling Center; Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets; VT Engage (center for service-learning, leadership education and civic engagement); VT Expressions (social organization dedicated to free expression in the arts); University Libraries; Muslim Students Union and Arabic Student Club; Legacy International; and Blacksburg Refugee Partnership.

Committees met bi-weekly during the first academic year. Project director, Jon Catherwood-Ginn, noted: "While continually inspiring, this generative, open process also unearthed conflict—typically in response to questions of what Muslim identities and cultures to explore through public programs and how best to do so." For example, two members representing partner organizations on one committee left because of the decision to include the participation of queer Muslim voices (they later attended program activities and applauded the team for "effectively representing the full spectrum" of Muslim identities and cultures).

Given the shift in political climate following the 2016 U.S. presidential election, unexpected additions to *Salaam* program activities included CivilityVT (a series of on-campus civil dialogue sessions), private activities with re-settled families from Afghanistan and Syria (facilitated by the Blacksburg Refugee Partnership and Center for Rhetoric in Society); a pop-up exhibition by students in the Islam, Art, and Social Change course, and expanded community performances by the Itraab Ensemble.

Houston's *Intersections* project worked with Ghana Think Tank to explore with a group of Syrian refugees, how to respond to the following concern expressed by a Houstonian: "Texas is supposed to be such a 'religious' place, but I have to find a place to hide to pray five times a



day.” In the spirit of “the mosque must come to the people” a mobile mosque was commissioned and built by Ghana Think Tank – placed upon a flat bed and hitched to two pick-up trucks “Texas style.” Organized and hosted by local Muslim groups that took ownership of the events across the city of Houston, programs in the mobile mosque included (as a sample): American Muslim Video Cypher Poetry Jam, Bismillah Block Party (organized by Ill Muslims), Syrian Women's Pop-up Lunch, Nurturance of Self and Other in Intimate Relationships Dialogue, Yoga in the Park, and “Mobile Muslims: A discussion on inclusivity with Grassroots Islam.”

### Measuring the Impact of This Work

How do we measure the effect of the Building Bridges model on students, as well as across the campus and larger community? There are many challenges to assessing how arts-based programs in general have effectively changed targeted populations, institutions, and the community at large. As has been referenced in this paper, evidence of growth and change is reflected more in the narrative framed by behavioral observations and dialogue, rather than through attempts to quantify discernible changes in knowledge and attitudes.

APAP contracted with the WolfBrown team to guide an assessment of the impact of the Building Bridges program on cohorts of students recruited to participate in project activities on each campus. “Research Fellows” were contracted by each project director to collect and provide for analysis of feedback from the designated student cohorts. Based upon a review of quantitative and qualitative data from this effort over two grant cycles, WolfBrown summarized their findings and conclusions in a white paper submitted to APAP in October 2018: “Based on the experience with the first round of grants, the effort to collect standardized survey data across all project locations was abandoned. The qualitative data that was collected through observations, interviews, and focus groups was much more compelling in its ability to capture the different ways in which students engaged with the programs and how individual students responded and developed as a result of their experiences. While it is impossible to generalize or calculate total impact based on anecdotes, the qualitative research was able to capture individual narratives, which sometimes took unexpected turns, in a level of detail that is much better suited to the richness of the experiences afforded by the program.”

WolfBrown formulated emerging ideas about programmatic interventions that work (i.e. to transform knowledge and appreciation about Muslim societies). For example, they observed that while opportunities to engage directly and personally with Muslims [Muslim artists] left a notable positive impression, it seemed that “non-verbal art forms such as music and dance may have a particular role to play in forging a sense of belonging to a larger cross-cultural community ... when audiences can engage with performances from another culture, or are even



able to participate through workshops or rehearsals, these art forms can have a strong emotional and cognitive impact.”

In addition to emphasizing the importance of opportunities to have personal contact with Muslims, the WolfBrown report addressed the value of experiencing and learning more about the current diversity of one’s community. They cited the significant importance of personal narratives “... the authenticity that was conveyed through these narratives [stories that were shared through autobiographical works, devised theatre pieces, and artists’ presentations] cut through to participants in a way that the superficial and highly mediated portrayals in mainstream media fail to achieve.”

Project outcomes and accomplishments were also evidenced by project participants in final reports, as well as video documentation, and during the Learning Labs convened by APAP. Feedback during the Labs emphasized the power of arts-based activities to elicit emotion which in turn motivates needed and continued conversation that leads to change. Building Bridges leaders discovered that unexpected ideas and activities presented by the artists adds a dimension to learning and understanding that extends beyond the campus community.

For the FAARRO residencies in Minnesota, *Midnimo* project leaders discussed the artists’ focus on issues around women’s empowerment, spirituality and healing, and fashion. This led to partnerships on and off campus (in all three of *Midnimo*’s Minnesota communities) that included women-focused community events, interfaith conversational meetings, fashion and dance events, as well as a live episode of the artists’ podcast.

*THIS Bridge* project director, Andrea Assaf, acknowledged that the artists’ interest and skill level for engaging in deep dialogue “brought extraordinary gifts to the two-year process ... such as Leila Buck’s approach to discussing Israel and Lebanon in a personal, heart-centered, story-based way and Heather Raffo’s ability to draw complete strangers, even veterans, into raw honest dialogue within minutes.”

Dr. Amani Wazwaz, professor of Communication and Literature at Moraine Valley Community College referred to the Building Bridges program as “the opportunity to put into action what I teach – to see students come alive.” Emran El-Badawi, director and associate professor of Arab Studies at the University of Houston, affirmed the impact of the *Intersections* project, as follows: “Islam is being shaped now by many factors. All that we do influences how people think about it. This is God’s work. I will be at the largest religious studies conference in a week, and will take these examples to help to transform others by sharing how we open people’s minds through the arts – and conquer peoples’ hearts.”





In the words of Jane Oxtan, former director of education and community engagement at Paramount Center for the Arts in St. Cloud (and *Midnimo* project director): “This project has expanded the Paramount’s footprint in this community – this door is opened ... all of these things that have happened [performances and exhibits focused on Somali arts and culture] are not going to be erased when the grant is done ...”

WolfBrown’s white paper ultimately concluded that “... the learning community that was built around the extended *Building Bridges* community—including program administrators, presenters, students, research fellows, faculty, content experts, and funders—has been very successful. However, a number of thorny questions remain about how best to disseminate these insights within the larger presenting field, how deep and/or extensive experiences need to be to achieve the desired outcomes, and how (or whether) the programmatic interventions could be scaled to achieve greater impact. The necessity of understanding how to open up dialogues and increase understandings across cultural perspectives (whether defined by religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, or political views) is more pressing now than ever, and we continue to believe that the arts can play an important role in this. We therefore encourage the participants and stakeholders of the *Building Bridges* program to continue this exploration in the future.”

### How Can We Make a Difference?

APAP and the Building Bridges grantees referenced in this paper are committed to advancing this work as a mission-driven component of their organizations for the future. The examples cited herein will hopefully generate interest and action among presenters and others in the presenting field: to explore the complexities and challenges of embracing diversity through the artist’s lens – to create greater awareness of the negative effects of anti-immigrant rhetoric and stereotypes in their own communities (whether focused on Muslims or others) – and, to harness the voice of artists as a means of addressing issues around identity and empowerment of youth and others who can make a difference in countering such fear and hatred. And perhaps most importantly, it will catalyze arts presenters to take a leadership role in developing new alliances and partnerships focused on building more culturally-inclusive and vibrant communities.

What actions can presenters and others in the arts presenting field take to apply the Building Bridges model strategies and resources in their work moving forward?

Develop a level of cultural competency necessary to address the complexities and challenges of cultural diversity in the community(ies) you serve. It is important that we understand the peril of assuming we already know and appreciate the complexities of cultural differences around



faith, history, and politics whether applied to Muslim, Latinx, Indigenous Native American, or other cultures from various regions of the world. Presenters (as well as agents/managers who represent artists from other cultures) should have a clear understanding of the cultural make-up of the audiences they serve as reflected by community demographic information – and the socio-political ramifications (often reflected by recent op-ed pieces or other feedback in the local and/or national media).

Make informed choices and build a narrative frame around programs with Muslim and other international artists based upon themes of unity and connection. In the face of current arguments around nationalism and religious identity, the arts can serve as levelers of experience, as a connection to the experience we all inherently share: humanity. News and communications around the visit of Muslim (and other international) artists, including the challenges of visa and immigration issues, creates greater awareness and engagement from micro to macro levels. Appropriate language and messaging around the artists and program activities serve as “bridges” across your community that help to avoid potential backlash or politically motivated accusations against the presenter that can be potentially destructive.

APAP has developed online links to [information and resources](#) cited in this paper as well as links to additional sources for building cultural competency and assistance with response to issues affecting communities with Muslim and related immigrant populations.

Include students and other young people in the community in planning and promoting programs and activities that acknowledge and celebrate social inclusion and cultural vitality. As with previous cycles of the Creative Campus grants program, it became clear that direct student involvement in the presenting process helps to increase overall student engagement in program activities. For the Building Bridges program, presenters identified and connected with leaders of campus student associations (e.g. campus-based international student organizations: Muslim Students Association, Somali Students Association, Arab Students Association) and other community-based organizations (e.g. local Islamic and Muslim mosques and community organizations, and local refugee organizations). Youth representatives from the above should be invited to participate on advisory committees and to otherwise assist with activities planned for first and second generation immigrant youth and their families. Students are also critical resources for utilizing social media as an information and marketing tool – to create tweets, memes, and related means to gain the attention of their peers and the larger community.

Create arts-based opportunities to motivate self-reflection and a sense of belonging among and between Muslim and non-Muslim youth as well as other Muslim and non-Muslim audiences in your community. Students want and need protected time and space to share similar



experiences, identify issues and needs, and think strategically together about their individual and collective identity. Marquese Capers, a student from LaGuardia Community College, said “I’m starting to see things from a broader scale – to move away from these labels and just humanizing the way I interact with everyone – and that’s what this process and this project Building Bridges has really done. It has taught me that – unity starts with humanity.”

Expand the number of mainstream performing arts presenters who include Muslim artists as part of their season. APAP’s website provides access to information and resources about artistic programming curated by its Building Bridges grantees, including a roster of Muslim artists who participated, and an overview of performances and residency activities presented at each site. Presenters can access this information to learn about artists who represent Muslim cultures and genres about which they are less familiar, and to contact Building Bridges colleagues directly for further thoughts and guidance based on their experience.

Engage with artists in a planning process well in advance of their residencies for presenters to gain an in-depth understanding of the content and context of their work. This requires presenters to listen and be respectful of the artist’s description of his/her work, and to lead conversations about audience composition and mutual expectations for the residency.

Maximize opportunities for artists to share stories and encourage participant engagement that is deep, authentic, and ultimately transformative. Early planning with Muslim artists to engage with audiences in multiple ways leads to a deeper understanding of the important contributions Muslims have made historically, and how they continue to enrich our contemporary society. The arts presenters goal to not just entertain but to “transform” audiences is dependent on providing multiple opportunities for audiences to interact with artists around their creative and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Invest in sufficient time and energy to develop and foster intercultural community relationships and dialogue – essentially a learning community. As discussed above, it is important to seek the input and guidance of community stakeholders to counter misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims in advance of, during, and following the residencies of Muslim artists. This includes seeking out and developing relationships with organizations that serve that community beyond the arts and culture scene. Otherwise the presenter risks the perception by some of the arts program as a political act.

It is important that arts presenters not relinquish, but rather strengthen, their voice and capacity to shape positive and constructive ways of understanding and embracing immigrant populations (as well as other marginalized members) in their community.



Unfortunately, the heated controversy about the rights and inclusion of immigrant populations in communities across the United States will continue to grow, especially as we move toward the 2020 presidential election. Presenters are key stakeholders in reducing the spread of hatred and divisibility that threatens the health of their community. Through the development of partnerships with Muslim artists, educators and advocates, they can collectively deliver inspiring performances and transformational learning experiences that will serve as a catalyst for change in their community.

The Building Bridges model will continue to be a work in progress. As DDFIA Director, Zeyba Rahman, noted during the Learning Lab: “We are a living laboratory learning from each other.” Much has been accomplished but we must continue to advance the Building Bridges mission in practice and in spirit. It is a process and a challenge that the arts presenting field will hopefully embrace as an opportunity – to enrich and deepen the performing arts experience for broader audiences – and more importantly, to lead the way to healing and unity in the communities we serve.

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