



Supporting a Sustainable Cultural Sector: The Mellon Foundation and Partners

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The Mellon Foundation's Puerto Rico initiative aims to sustain and enrich the archipelago's vibrant cultural, knowledge and memory ecosystems and the individuals who work within them. Join representatives from the Mellon Foundation and their dedicated partners in Puerto Rico for a look at how their grant-making strategies are designed to redress past underfunding, address urgent needs, and build a sustainable artistic, educational, intellectual, cultural and archival infrastructure for the future.

Facilitators

Alexis Ortiz, The Mellon Foundation

Glenisse Pagán, Filantropía Puerto Rico (Philanthropy Puerto Rico)

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Joseph Ocasio, Artist, Acción Valerosa (Courageous Action)

Glenisse Pagán: The [Forward Puerto Rico Fund](#)—part of Filantropía Puerto Rico—is a philanthropic-strategic investment tool designed to mobilize resources for systemic change, advancing equity throughout Puerto Rico. We want to share with you today how philanthropic partners have come together to invest in Puerto Rico to strengthen and support the island's community based organizations.

We look at how we can expand the sector and develop the infrastructure with resources and funding. They bring people together and make connections.

The Mellon Foundation and Flamboyan Foundation partnered to fund the sustainability of the Forward Puerto Rico Fund.

Carlos Rodríguez: The Flamboyán Foundation focuses its work around ensuring Puerto Rico thrives economically and culturally. It has an Arts Fund to help preserve arts and culture in Puerto Rico. Since we weren't experts in the arts, before we started the fund we convened artists and arts organizations to hear the needs of the arts community and how the foundation could best support and sustain the arts.

From these conversations we learned artists needed space to create, exhibit, store, live and more. They also needed health benefits. The Arts Fund strives to help organizations to thrive and meet the needs of artists and organizations.

For more details on the Arts Fund initiatives and impact, see the presentation.

Alexis Ortiz: [The Puerto Rico initiative](#) is one of the first things that Elizabeth Alexander created when she joined the Mellon Foundation as president in 2018. It was very important to her because Puerto Rico has been linked to the United States for 125+ years through a colonial relationship. It's often hidden and the best way to talk about it is to let Puerto Rico and the diaspora express themselves.

In the past decade Puerto Rico has experienced a drastic demographic shift, especially after natural disasters. There are around 3 million people on the island and 6 million on the continent. The number of Puerto Ricans who identify as White has plummeted and the percentage who identify as non-White has increased.

Prior to hurricane María, Puerto Rico did not receive much funding, even from Mellon. When funding came in it was very episodic. In the United States, funders aren't sure how to categorize Puerto Rico: it's not domestic, it's not international—it continues to be an ongoing conversation.

Puerto Rico is in a golden age of cultural production. It has always had an outside influence on culture, but more and more circulation is happening. While it is gaining more visibility, more is needed and artists need to be able to show their work on the continent and come back and live the archipelago.

The goals of the work and funding Mellon does in Puerto Rico are to (1) create sustainable cultural opportunities, (2) build capacity, and (3) elevate voices and fortify networks.

The Mellon Foundation uses a long, ecosystem approach to the work. It supports large organizations, like the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, as well as small organizations. It doesn't support individual artists but tries to move money to organizations that do. It also does a lot of work with universities. Recently, for the first time Mellon supported a study of African Puerto Rican art and culture.

Logistically, Mellon has had to change how it does some of its grant making. For example, it has had to accept materials in Spanish and has translated its guidelines into Spanish.

At the beginning of the initiative Mellon brought together 30 artists, scholars, funders and administrators to learn about the culture and what is needed. It did not want to do any grant making until it fully understood what was needed and what could help, without overstepping. From there, it continued to learn and create deep partnerships. One of the things Mellon heard loud and clear was the need for administrative support. Artists want to be artists and not do or worry about the administrative side of things. To address this, the Mellon Foundation focused on building out the Center for Creative Economy's capacity so it could provide tiered services to artists to help with administrative needs.

Javier Hernández Acosta: The [Center for Creative Economy](#) is an artists service organization. Prior to its partnership with the Mellon Foundation, the organization had provided some low level accounting help to artists. After convening with the Mellon Foundation the center created a separate 501(c)(3) to meet the needs of artists and organizations.

The center created an instrument to identify 19 steps to grant administration. As part of its grant making, it grants services rather than funding. For example, artists can apply for accounting, legal or other administrative services. In addition to the traditional grant making and services that were already supported by the Flamboyán Foundation, thanks to the Mellon partnership the center was able to do some "trust" grants where it can provide services or funding without the standard requirements or reporting that come with grants.

In order to know where to begin, the center started with research; the value of having data on the cultural sector was very important. Then it moved into the management services and helping to meet the emotional and mental health needs of artists.

With the Mellon Foundation, the center has created different programs including Maniobra, a cultural employment program, and Observatorio, data and research on the creative sector. Data for Puerto Rico was not available; it didn't exist since Puerto Rico doesn't fit the "standard" categories. Things are now getting better: both Americans for the Arts and the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture are expanding their efforts to gather data. In 2023 they were able to publish a statistical yearbook of the arts, culture and creative industries in Puerto Rico.

Two artists, **Joseph Ocasio Rivera** with Acción Valerosa and **Yari Helfeld** with Arte y Maña spoke to the work they have been able to do with the funding from this strategic partnership. Because of these initiatives they have been able to design a strategic plan, collect important knowledge, expand partnerships, have a physical space to do their work, create and sell products, and become a 501(c)(3).

They have appreciated being a part of the conversation from the start of the project. The foundations have given them strength and empowered them to make the most impact for artists, families and the island.

Both artists have always worked to connect the arts to the people and well-being of the island. They look to creativity to find solutions to problems. After hurricane María, there was an important shift in how people look at the arts and how the arts can make real change. Although the hurricane caused a lot of destruction, there was also a rebirth because the United States and other countries started to support and see Puerto Rico more. The arts also brought hope and healing to communities after the hurricane, proving to be just as valuable as food and gas. They shared a video of a community member speaking to the impact the arts had on his community: "It should be part of emergency services because it fuels us, brings a smile, gives us hope."

Javier ended his presentation by sharing the impact the Center for Creative Economy has had in Puerto Rico. (See presentation for details.) It is in the middle of a three-year program so it is still gathering the data. It will also embark on a new strategic plan soon and believe it is important to identify new or updated needs.

Questions and Answers

- What are the services the Center for Creative Economy provides and who staffs it?
 - Marketing, accounting and planning services for artists are done in-house while legal and other services are outsourced through arrangements/partners. We originally hoped to provide all services in-house, but we had capacity challenges so they built different models to meet the various needs. We also have educational models to help artists learn on their own.
- How do you serve the archipelago versus the diaspora?
 - There are a lot of challenges. Thinking about it and building on it in the beginning is a great idea. Connecting and building on understanding for artists in each place is needed.
- What are some resources from the services of the Center for Creative Economy that we can take back home? And what are some tips for grant making?
 - Check out our website: <https://www.centrodeeconomiacreativa.com/>.
 - Thinking about funding for programs is good but the overhead is always going to be there, and 10% is not enough. We have training programs with the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture and School of Arts to help train the professionals on grant making.
 - Be flexible with grant making and try to have a close impact.

- Trust the key players and support the artists: no-strings-attached funding, where the requirement is verbal reporting, is radical and based on trust, and we need to develop that more.
- Audience member reflection: After hearing the community leader in the video say that artists' work is and should be part of first responders, I have been thinking about the different layers of funding and how it has to be accessed and analyzed. It makes me think about the notion that the arts is a human right. The United States just became a part of UNESCO, and so I think we need to keep the conversation going on how the arts and culture is a human right. Arts and culture are valuable in themselves. We are often looking for other ways to put value on the arts around economic development and health, and we need to also push forward that the arts are valuable on their own.