

# THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

## CREATIVE MIX WILL HELP US PROSPER

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The Valley is scrambling to provide basic services to thousands of newcomers every month. Our schools face increasing pressure to raise student achievement. Supporters of bioscience are trying to ramp up our role in this exciting field of medicine and technology.

Do we really need to focus on arts and culture? Does creativity really matter?

You bet.

In the global economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Valley needs a constant supply of fresh ideas, new businesses and innovative products to compete.

A new study from the Maricopa Partnership for Arts and Culture, "Creative Connections," highlights the critical role of creativity in the modern economy. It concludes the Valley needs to do a better job in supporting arts and culture, for their own sake and for our long-term prosperity.

The study estimates that 106,633 people are employed in creative occupations in greater Phoenix (for example, design, media, arts and culture, software, business strategies, health and biological sciences and advanced technology), or almost 6.1 percent of the labor force.

Yet the Valley has a "creativity gap" compared with other cities, leaving us at a competitive disadvantage with such cities as Austin, Seattle, Portland, Dallas, Denver and San Diego in the percentage of it's workforce in creative occupations.

The urgency is new, but the idea is old. The model for a good education, going back centuries, included a healthy dose of art and music, as well as academic subjects.

Governments have a long history of supporting cultural initiatives, such as museums and theatres, for very practical reasons. Those institutions help forge a city's identity and bind the community together. A thriving cultural scene makes a city more livable, a place where people want to move and stay.

It's time to get creative. Here are some starting points:

- **Coordinate local efforts.** Communities around the Valley are adding cultural facilities. Peoria, for instance, is building a performing-arts center. They need to find ways to work together and build on one another.
- **Put creativity back in education.** With pressure to raise academic standards, including the Federal No Child Left Behind, the arts got short shrift. Schools need to widen their focus, and private partners can help out.
- **Get local government on board.** We're talking mind-set, not big bucks. Zoning, for example, can encourage arts districts. Events like the wildly successful First Friday in Phoenix help spread creative energy, but they need proper planning and direction.

- **Pump up funding.** The Valley has lots going on, but the financial foundation is wobbly. Most groups, like the artistically bold Actors Theatre, live season to season and face periodic crises. They need help, through corporate and private donors, to build endowments that will cushion the economic bumps.
- **Toot our creative horn.** The image of the Valley as a giant retirement community is far too persistent. Strategically planned festivals and international competitions are possibilities for raising our artistic profile. And local leaders should be aware of the region's assets. The "Creative Connections" study shows the Valley is ahead of the national average in employment in design, a fact that's under the radar even at home.

Myra Millinger, president of the Maricopa Partnership for Arts and Culture, is on the mark in her observation: "Ultimately, the economic advantages of attending to the arts and culture sector benefits us all."

Paying attention to our creative side will pay off for everyone.