



Project Description

28th annual Lotus World Music & Arts Festival (2021) - Lotus in the Park

Lotus Fest 2021 continued upon an annual tradition of offering four full days of diverse, engaging cultural experiences representative of the world's musical and artistic cultural heritage, through music and global arts. The Festival included ticketed entry to downtown venues, like the historic Buskirk-Chumley Theater, and outdoor tents, inviting people to experience the Festival within the precinct of an historic southern Indiana town. Lotus Fest prioritized community engagement programming by coordinating events, activities, and concerts at the Festival Arts Village, Lotus in the Park, and pop-up performances. These events were co-developed with community partners and were offered at no cost, coordinating with key partners to meet expressed community needs in the arts and culture. The example of community engagement I will talk about in this case study on Lotus Fest include:

Lotus in the Park (LITP) (free): Gathered 2000+ people in a city park near public transit for a family-friendly, Saturday afternoon of Lotus Artist performances, workshops, and activities. LITP's Arts Pavilion featured 10-15 arts/culture activity stations led by partner art organizations, social service agencies, and environmental nonprofits. LITP performances, led by Lotus Artists performing in ticketed music showcases, were given on Switchyard Stage, so that people could enjoy the music of Lotus Fest without needing tickets.

A number of other community engagement projects within the scope of Lotus Fest exist, such as our Festival Arts Village. For the purpose and focus of this case study, I will concentrate on Lotus in the Park.

Organization Description

The Lotus Education & Arts Foundation is a not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization based in Bloomington, Indiana (est. 1994). Their mission is to create opportunities to experience, celebrate, and explore the diversity of the world's cultures, through music and the arts.

Community Partner Description

There were three different levels of community partners for Lotus in the Park during Lotus Fest:

Lotus Artists gave live performances on the mainstage at Switchyard Park, as well as public lecture/demonstrations in front of the Arts Pavilion (Nohe y Sus Santos, Blato Zlato, Nation Beat, Saraswathi). Paper artist Shelley Hanmo Qian gave instructions on how to make your own paper Korean lantern.

Lotus invited **local businesses/vendors** to provide food via food trucks. EarthKeepers Bloomington provided trash & composting services. There were also **60 local business and corporate sponsors** who partnered with Lotus to financially back the Festival and LITP.

Lotus partnered with **arts/education nonprofits, university, and local social service agencies** to present activities in the Arts Pavilion at Lotus in the Park. This included Indiana University departments of culture and language studies, IU Mathers Museum of World Cultures, FAR Center For Contemporary Arts, La Casa/Hispanic Student Alliance, LGBTQIA+ association, WonderLab Children's Museum, etc. (Pictured below: Switchyard Park, LITP)



History/Description of Pre-project Partnership

Selection process for key organizations

Engagement efforts for Lotus Festival are guided by established, dialogic partnerships that have built over the last 20+ years with local/state government, community organizations, local business networks, and local public transit. Lotus builds these community-centered relations through dialogue and by asking what community partners need from us. Lotus partners inform the design of Festival events to maximize attendance, participation, and situate Lotus Fest as an accessible, welcoming experience for all. We look to partners as experts in their areas. In return, Lotus shares expertise/resources on multicultural arts engagement/program delivery. Many Festival partners specialize in working with historically marginalized communities and populations. This expands our capacity to offer inclusive multicultural arts programming models, expand our programmatic depth, and enrich the lives of Bloomington residents/visitors via multicultural arts experiences that are built upon dialogue, community need, and trust.

Selection process for key individuals

Festival artists are selected on the basis of artistic excellence, geographic diversity, availability, capacity for educational presentations, and affordability. We also look for “fit” within the Festival aesthetic and specific venues, engaging stage presence, unique backstories, and overall mix of style, age, and gender. Lotus’ unusual roster-focused approach (not relying on headliners) relies on a non-hierarchical mix of performers. In our experience, we have found that this maximizes audience engagement while stretching a limited budget to include more artists. Community Arts & Education Director spearheads strategies for engaging and developing partnerships within the Bloomington community.

Evaluation Process [AD, AE, CE checklists w/narrative]

Community cultivation process overall: building relationships on dialogue, long-term relationship building, and meeting to discuss needs.

AD, AC Checklist Total: 36

The target audience of Lotus Fest and Lotus in the Park is generally understood; it is defined with some specificity. Lotus Fest doesn’t serve any one particular audience or demographic in general, as much as the community at large. It also brings in significant cultural tourism, especially in pre-pandemic years. This somewhat influences community engagement efforts and affects communications with potential community engagement partners, as the goal of most community engagement partnerships are to increase the reach of Lotus’ arts programming and eliminate cost barriers to participating in the Festival. There is some specificity around initiatives to partner with organizations that want or have expressed a need for increased access to the arts for their constituency, or already work within the Bloomington arts scene and are seeking arts partners.

Many community engagement relationships at Lotus, however, are based on long-standing partnerships that have been developing over the past 20 years or so. For example, Lotus partners frequently with the local university, with social service agencies, and assisted living facilities that have been around since the beginning of Lotus. Lotus brings known expertise in arts program delivery, while the community partners bring constituencies Lotus wouldn't otherwise reach with just the Festival. Community engagement efforts at Lotus Fest, and specifically through Lotus in the Park, exist to create an overall stronger connection between the organization and the local community, or to develop relationships that may not otherwise be able to happen due to the regular cost barriers, accessibility barriers, etc. that are associated with a ticketed venue that aims to generate revenue.

CE Checklist Score: 50

Lotus, in general, has little research or resources that define its participating communities—who they are, where they are in Bloomington, what they need or want from the arts. There is confusion about the word “community” within our organization, particularly confusion by the Board of Directors. For Lotus in the Park, that is more specifically defined to mean local arts and education agencies/nonprofits that want to have an activity booth during Lotus Festival. Since these project partners for LITP are well known, they are typically already based on long-standing relationships. While these relationships have been formed over a long period of time, there could be more active and ongoing dialogue to ensure the partnership is meeting everyone's needs, via focus groups, surveys, and partner meetings. This would also enhance understanding by partner organizations of what Lotus does and what it can offer the community, and vice versa. Lotus community engagement projects like LITP are explicitly created as a branch of their mission to engage others through global music and the arts, and the goals of community engagement (like for LITP) are not financial. The goals are to reach as many people as possible, especially those underserved by the arts.

Outcomes

10-15% of Festival survey respondents directly mentioned Lotus in the Park as being (one of) their favorite events, because of its location and also because of the activities offered.

2000+ individuals engaged with arts activities and musical performances at no cost at Lotus in the Park, reducing the cost barrier and increasing the accessibility of the Festival weekend overall. We didn't survey specifically for outcomes like increased mental health or wellbeing, but some survey quotes lead to questions like: “do offering community engagement activities at Lotus Fest increase event satisfaction? Elevated mood? Feelings of wellbeing?”

- Survey Question from 2021: “What were your favorite elements about Lotus Fest 2021?”
 - “Audience participation”
 - “Community”
 - “The collective energy and cumulative joy”
 - “Sharing the joy with others”

Relationships Maintenance Plan/Activities

Plans include continuing to work with partners on new project ideas, workshops, community engagement programming that happens year-round outside of the Festival. This is done with the intention to keep relationships alive and active, instead of relying on partners to respond just around Festival time.

Lotus is joining other community projects like First Friday Gallery Walk. This will grant wider access to Lotus to be embedded in the Bloomington arts ecosystem by offering events that draw in a lot of attendance at little cost (to the organization or attendees).

There is also planning to better engage Lotus donors and sponsors as part of relationship maintenance through surveys, partnership meetings, and by restructuring the fund development program to be more focused on building community-centered partnerships, partnering with other nonprofits on fund development, rather than wealth management and individual donor stewardship.

Assessment

What worked well on purpose

The Arts Pavillion at Lotus in the Park worked well because of its intentional design to be open to a fairly unrestricted, unlimited number of community arts partners. The only restriction was that the subject matter presented by the arts partners had to be related to global arts and culture. This allowed for creativity to flourish, and created an engaging environment for the many instead of the few.

What worked well accidentally

Lotus in the Park benefitted the Festival overall in a somewhat accidental way by generating more publicity for the Festival than planned. Staff reported talking to a number of individuals who had never heard of Lotus Festival before and were intrigued to learn more about the organization and/or attend future events.

What could be improved next time.

Lotus can improve how it measures the results of community engagement projects, and how these projects are measured over time (i.e. more longitudinal studies or surveying perhaps in partnership with the local university).

Nicole Vasconi | Development Director, Lotus Education & Arts Foundation
CET Training Cohort Case Study
February 19, 2022

Lotus has new staff (and frequent turnover), so it can find ways of continuing strategies to take new relationships slowly – to build from the ground up, like Lotus has done with older, long-time existing partners.

Lessons learned for effective engagement

Lotus may benefit from incorporating community engagement principles into Festival fund development. For example, Lotus should pursue grant co-writing opportunities with other local arts nonprofits and the university to increase access to funds, resources, and wider audiences/constituencies. Lotus can also work to create a sponsorship model that is based more on partnership (dialogue, understanding, mutual need, and community development) than charity/philanthropy. Perhaps Lotus in the Park could be a good place to test this more community-focused model of development.

Community Engagement & Fund Development could be the focus of future case studies and research.