

"I love the active-ness of "Activation" in the program name - it implies that the initiative will be both talk and action, rather than lots of the former and little of the latter. I appreciate that artists' input is not only welcome but imperative to shaping the program." (Playwright and ICWA Focus Group Participant)

The ICWA Focus Groups

Between mid-February and June of this year, the Arts Alliance hosted six focus groups with members of Illinois' creative community. Each focus group included an average of 10 participants at different stages of their creative careers and belonging to a range of disciplinary backgrounds. The purpose of these focus groups was to invite feedback on the intended goals and potential career pathways outlined by the ICWA. We were interested in knowing whether they would participate in such a program, which of the focus industries (Health and Wellness, IT, Advanced Manufacturing, Youth Development, and Advertising) they found most appealing, what kinds of practices or opportunities they would like to see in the workplace, and what questions they have for potential employers involved in the pilot program.

The responses we received varied as much as the backgrounds and experiences of the participants. Many expressed enthusiasm for the program and a readiness to participate. An arts administrator who was forced to find a job in a different state because of COVID-19 reflected that the cross-over opportunities outlined in the ICWA might have kept them in Chicago. Some showed particular interests in fields such as IT, Health and Wellness, Construction, Cultural Tourism, and Education, and recognized that employers would find their skill sets desirable: "Everyone wants disruptors," said one participant, "That is what we as creatives do – creating something out of nothing – bending concepts." Another participant who teaches dance at a higher education institution noted that most of her students and their professors are already realizing and preparing for the need to diversify their skills: "Both students and professor are grappling with that reality – the way we traditionally prepared them doesn't work anymore. We are all rediscovering what this new journey is going to be." She and others note that the ICWA anticipates an important need in the creative world and "want this program to be in place now."

However, some focus group participants expressed skepticism about the program. "I don't dream of labor or working for big industries," noted a visual artist. "If you want to support artists, then you should reframe the way artists are supported in their practice... you should uplift individual artists/business owners." Several participants felt that the ICWA is trying to "streamline" them into a 9-5 work system. "The artists I'm in community with, we don't want to be doing other things. We want to be supported in actually making our art." Focus group participants who are supportive of this program also have certain caveats and expectations about such a program. The following pages list these caveats and expectations. Using data collected before, during, and after the focus group meetings, this report contains demographic information about the meeting participants, the kinds of industry-crossing work they are already doing, the skills outside their creative practice that they are most interested in learning, their "must-haves" for participating in a program like the ICWA, and the key themes and concerns that they voiced during and after the focus group meetings.

The Focus Group Participants

- 64 creatives participated in the six focus groups.
- More than half were from Chicago or Chicago's north and west suburbs (54%). More than one

quarter (26%) were from Cook, DuPage, Will, and Lake Counties. The remaining 20 percent of participants were from West, South, and Central Illinois (we are working on a final focus group with greater participation from central and southern geographies)

- 57% of participants were BIPOC creatives while 43% were white
- Almost half of the participants (45%) were 25-34 years old and around one fifth were 35-44 years old
- More than half of the participants (52%) identified as female; almost one third identified as male; and around one quarter identified as non-binary/third gender
- Participants came from a variety of disciplines, including performing arts, visual arts, media arts, music, writing, and arts administration (in order of frequency of responses). Many worked across several of these disciplines.
- Almost half (49%) of the participants earn most of their income from the creative sector while around one fifth earn less than 25% or less from the creative sector
 - ◆ More than half of the participants listed income sources outside the creative industries. The most common sources of income include retail and hospitality, food service, and health and wellness. Other sources include childcare, administrative work, higher education, IT, diversity specialists, and library services.
- Less than 20% of participants identified as part-time or full-time employees of a creative organization
- More than two thirds of participants work as full-time or part-time contractors in the creative sector.
- Around one third of the participants identified as non-profit founders, creative business owners, and/or creative entrepreneurs.
- 83% had a bachelor's degree or higher degree. 11% had an associates degree, professional degree or other technical/trade/vocational training. Only four participants had no degree

Industry-Crossing Work that Our Participants Are Already Doing

As noted, more than half of the focus group participants listed income sources outside the creative sector in fields that include finance, health and wellness, mental health, hospitality, education, senior care, and military service. Many of these participants feel that their creative skills and training bring great value to these industries. For example, a writer and musician who trained new staff in hospitality used breathing and warm up exercises to foster team building. A media artist noted "I used to teach preschool and being able to be performative and entertaining definitely increased my value in that job...I was really good at keeping the kiddos focused/engaged." She and others note that there is a lot of potential to design health education and mindfulness programs for both traditional and creative fields. An interdisciplinary artist with a background in holistic healing stated "I'd love to be paid by companies to consult on how to bring healthier habits, mindfulness, and creative movement into workspaces, as well as outside of work - improving relationships, goals, etc."

Top Skills that Focus Group Participants are Eager to Acquire

- Coding
- Marketing
- Bereavement and trauma support
- Carpentry and welding
- Network architecture
- Information services
- Counseling/ social work

- Web development
- Holistic health practices
- Leadership training
- Entrepreneurship
- Cyber security forensics
- Web design
- Financial literacy training
- Training Creatives to translating soft skills into metrics
- Language skills including ASL

Frequently Cited “Must Haves” for Engaging in this Program

- Secure and predictable income stream
- Health insurance
- Flexible hours and pay structures
- Remote work possibilities
- Paid training, particularly along the lines of an apprenticeship model
- Professional development opportunities
- Provision of financial protections between work placements
- Support mechanisms through peer or intermediary networks
- Clear understanding from the beginning about their role as creatives working in the organization
- Creative control and copyright protection

Top Themes and Concerns

1. Support Systems to Prevent Creative “Burnout”

A number of the focus group participants shared feelings of emotional and physical “burnout” arising when working outside the creative industry. This stemmed from the feeling that their creative capacities were not valued or applied in these positions. One participant described “the emotional cost of turning up in a job [that] doesn’t let me do creative work.” Others reported this burnout arose from the obligation to fit into and justify their presence in a so-called “traditional” work environment: “The emotional and actual labor to make it work for someone like me was all on me.” Participants offered a number of strategies to prevent this burnout, including the appointment of a facilitator or intermediary that helps creatives negotiate the challenges of adapting to their new work environments, and the establishment of a cohort system or creative affinity group that enables creatives to compare notes, debrief, and draw upon the experiences of people who had made similar transitions.

2. Flexible Employment Structures

Many focus group participants professed that a rigid work environment that demanded fixed hours would be an immediate deal breaker. One participant noted “One thing that led me away from corporate America was that you have to be available at all times.” For many creatives, the flexibility to work around such things as audition schedules or residencies is a must. Many favor remote opportunities that are “less hinged on being in front of a desk or boss and more suited to artists who

do gigs and have to be on the road.” Others showed an interest in a job share or rotational employment structure. This would have the additional advantage of expanding the options available to participants, so that it is “less about sticking to one field and more about being recruited to do projects under a network of places (different fields) that hire regularly.” As one participant put it, “I think half the battle is seeking out work but knowing you could have a couple of options from a rotation is more enticing.”

3. Educating Employers to Understand, Appreciate, and Support Creatives

Another major deal breaker for the creatives we surveyed is the idea of working for employers who don't value or support creative work, taking a “strictly extractive” approach that expects creatives to “come in and fix things.” Several participants suggested that aside from training creatives to enter new companies and work environments, the ICWA should also train employers to understand and appreciate the nature and value of creative work. One participant would like employers to help trainees develop “passion projects or art skills that are not necessarily a part of the job training program.” This would not only demonstrate their support of creative work but also offer a solution to “potential workforce burnout” discussed above.

4. Value-Aligned Employers and a Growth Oriented Work Environment

In addition to working for employers who understand and support creative work, our participants are also interested in working for companies whose values align with their own and who wish to foster more human-centered, consent-oriented work environments. As one group participant put it, “I would need employers to be joining the program not as a first and final step to integrating art in their workplaces, but as one part of a variety of actions centered on treating people like people.” Another participant reflected upon their past experiences, noting “I've been burned by so many employers in an exploitative and often demeaning way. I'm interested in employers that have a mutual respect for their workers.”

5. Pathways to Professional Development and Advancement

Focus group participants expressed a desire for professional development and pathways for upward mobility within the company that hires them. An arts administrator and visual artist from Centralia emphasized the “ability to grow, climb the ladder, upward mobility within a company” rather than a sole reliance on “season/campaign/contract-based” work. The same participant also asked whether a program such as the ICWA would equip creatives with the training and tools that will be transferrable to other employment situations or contexts: “Can I get certified through this program to work somewhere else like I have a degree? What could this program give me that I could take everywhere beyond this job or this geographical bound?”

6. Advocating for creatives and helping them to translate/communicate their skills to employers and hiring agencies

Numerous participants expressed a need for support in documenting and certifying their transferable skills. A media artist from Springfield who has years of experience but no college degree stated that creatives involved in a program like the ICWA “would need an advocate for creative/affirmative action to place people where they can thrive where they may not normally be hired because of that resume barrier etc. for a hiring manager.” Other participants emphasized the need for such a program to locate existing gaps in industries such as standard patient care. One participant told us she recently earned her standardized patient care certification but when looking for jobs she has noticed a gap between the high demand for people to fill these roles and the ability to locate and apply for these roles: “It

seems like a lot of scrambling to find people to do it at times and other times lots of people trying to get into it.” Another participant who is interested in working in end-of-life care remarked on the difficulty of getting a job in this industry: “I provide emotional support, have storytelling skills, studied grieving, death midwifery, would put together funerals, but there is no place in that industry that you can do without expensive training...it so hard to get the gatekeepers to take a chance on you.”

“Intentional Disturbance”: Changing the Culture of Work

In conclusion, our focus group participants expressed a strong enthusiasm for the ICWA and agreed upon the need for a program that provides paid training as well as pathways to steady employment and benefits in supportive environments.. Yet they also hope that employing creatives will be the start of something bigger for the work culture at large, creating what one artist calls “an intentional disturbance” that nudges employers towards a model that prizes cooperation and embraces collaboration rather than being led solely by profitability and competition. “Things must change in how we work with and for one another,” says one participant. “Grind culture can’t be a thing.”