

In Service of Art

Incorporating art into community outreach poses challenges, but the experiences arts-based service organizations provide also offer unique fulfillment.

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Students participate in a CityStep session held in Lowell Lecture Hall.

Why Art? (excerpt)

CityStep founder Sabrina T. Peck '84 points to the body of research that ties art to **neurological development**. “An artistic experience is a critical piece of cognitive development,” she says. “And it's a critical piece of identity development.... All the research shows that children who are able to express themselves creatively, who are able to build a sense of identity from the inside out, do better. Do better in school, do better with peers, do better in society.”

Caroline A. Butler-Rahman has taught sixth and seventh graders at the Amigos School for more than eight years and now helps coordinate between the school and CityStep. Her daughters went through the CityStep program, too, for which she is very grateful. “Students... find it to be a safe and joyous place to find themselves and to get to know their classmates outside of school, outside of the academic, in a way where the playing field evens out,” she says. “It allows kids with equally strong but very different skills and strengths to feel really capable and be leaders.”

Life Informs Art

For Peck, the most distinguishing aspect of service in the arts is its ability to foster rich, thriving exchanges that challenge and inspire all participants. “The reciprocal aspect of CityStep is extremely important to me,” she says. “That it is not just the benefit that these undergrads are providing students. It's that they, in turn, reap so many benefits from this service experience, because it is a life-changing experience.”

Laura E. Weidman Powers '04, a CityStep alum, says that she learned at least as much from CityStep as she did in her undergraduate classes. “It was really influential in how I learned to work on teams and also lead peers,” she says. “It also showed me a lot about the power of using something like art as a medium and a message for connecting with folks who are from a different background or having a different experience from you.” Today, Weidman Powers channels CityStep's spirit of growth and self-discovery as CEO of [Code2040](#), a nonprofit that encourages and supports black and Latina women in tech and has received recognition from Fortune, The Knight Foundation, and [the White House](#).

Despite the national trend of funding cuts in the arts, Harvard's arts service programs continue to strengthen and grow. . . Harvard's CityStep is working to expand to fifth through seventh graders at every school in the Cambridge public school system; higher up, Peck is preparing to launch CityStep.org, an undergirding platform through which the board will help facilitate and fundraise for program development across all four of its universities—and eventually, Peck hopes, make CityStep a national endeavor.

Peck thinks arts initiatives can play a crucial role in bringing together what feels like an increasingly divided world. “I was a social studies major, and I'm an artist.... What I see is: In our fractured society, CityStep uses dance and creative collaboration to build mutual understanding among children of different backgrounds, incomes, neighborhoods,” she says. “It's that mutual understanding... that community-building.... Those are the building blocks of why I think CityStep has such impact on young people and has such impact, potentially, on society.”