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THE ACCIDENTAL
ARTS SUPPORTER
AN ASSESSMENT OF THE
COMPREHENSIVE EMPLOYMENT
AND TRAINING ACT (CETA)

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The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) is often credited as a significant source of funding for emerging minority and community-based arts organizations in the 1970s. Unfortunately, much of this history is anecdotal. This study examines available data to assess the impact of CETA on the arts as a whole, rather than on particular arts organizations and/or programs.

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The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA) is often credited as a significant source of funding for emerging minority and community-based arts organizations in the 1970s. Not since the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the 1930s had Congress made such a large commitment to increasing job opportunities for the unemployed. The federal program certainly offered crucial employment to a generational cohort of women and minority artists early in their careers, and its impact may have been even wider. In an article on museum exhibitions, Chon Noriega argues that CETA funding enabled the incorporation of racial and sexual minority communities into arts institutions in a way that maintained the elite orientation of these organizations: in general, minority and working-class artists sought funding through CETA, while white, middle-class artists obtained grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). He concludes that after CETA and similar programs were dismantled in the early 1980s, and both elite and minority arts programs had to rely on the NEA for funding, “these distinctions broke down [and] the culture wars began” (1999, 61–62).¹

CETA was enacted in December 1973 in an effort to provide job opportunities for the structurally unemployed—those who are chronically unemployed because they have no marketable skills—particularly within disadvantaged communities

such as minorities, the poor, youth, and so on. It was a unique effort that combated unemployment by simultaneously increasing job opportunities and providing the training needed to perform the duties required.

In addition to the target group was another, unexpected, beneficiary—the arts. Initially, relatively low levels of CETA funds were allocated to the arts: CETA was a manpower project, not specifically an arts project. But, because of the high rate of unemployment among artists, many qualified for CETA positions and secured funding through the program. The level of federal expenditures on the arts subsequently increased, revitalizing arts programs, particularly at the community level. Steven C. Dubin noted that the “availability of CETA funds was frequently cited as a primary factor contributing to [an] effervescence of artistic activity” (1987, 3).

Much of the information about CETA and the arts, however, is anecdotal. To produce a quantitative assessment of the legislation’s impact, this study examines documentation produced by program administrators and supervising agencies. Rather than focusing on particular arts organizations or programs, the study evaluates CETA’s effect on the arts as a whole. It also considers the program’s ever-changing policies and objectives, all of which made CETA an accidental arts supporter.

STUDY METHOD

To determine CETA’s impact on the arts, I reviewed various government documents and reports, including federal budgets, annual reports by the National Commission for Manpower Policy, and Congressional hearings related to the arts. I also examined evaluations of the CETA program by the National Research Council and others, and newspaper accounts, scholarly papers and journals, and literature regarding public funding of the arts. CETA’s administrators did not maintain systematic records

of how funds were distributed among artists and arts organizations. The documentation that does exist predominantly focuses on raw placement figures, largely overlooking the actual job and training experiences of program participants, the long-term impact on participants, the types of jobs in which they were placed, or the effects on the industries in which they were employed. A synthesis of the information that was gathered indicates that CETA not only presented many women and minorities with opportunities that otherwise would not have been afforded them but also served as an important catalyst and source of support for the arts.

CETA’S STRUCTURE AND PROGRAM GOALS

When CETA was enacted, late in 1973, the United States was enjoying a period of low unemployment. As William Mirengoff et al. noted, it is during such times that “attention reverts to the structurally unemployed” (1980, 100). CETA was created to mitigate joblessness, especially for this population; Title II provided public service employment (PSE) opportunities that were specifically targeted at the chronically unemployed. In 1974 the U.S. economy began to falter, and by summer the country was in a recession. In December the original legislation was amended. Title VI was added, expanding CETA’s coverage by establishing a program for countercyclical PSE—a program to provide temporary jobs and alleviate unemployment among the general population. By May 1975 the unemployment rate had risen alarmingly, to nearly 9% (National Commission for Manpower Policy 1976, 24). By the end of 1976, nearly one-half of the nation’s unemployed workers were between the ages of 16 and 24 (15), and CETA allocations became increasingly geared toward providing training and jobs for baby boomers who were entering an ever more competitive labor market. One unintended

result of this shift away from structural unemployment was that benefits to the disadvantaged and poor, toward whom the initial legislation was aimed, were diminished. Amendments in 1976 and 1978, however, did make attempts to refocus the legislation on structural unemployment, with some success.

CETA distributed grants to “prime sponsors”—local and state governments with populations of 100,000 or more (National Research Council 1980, xv). Prime sponsors were responsible for identifying organizations and projects that qualified for CETA funds and distributing the monies as they saw fit, according to guidelines set forth by the federal government. This decentralization of power was an attempt to increase flexibility, so that the funds could be used to address local needs. Unfortunately, it also gave rise to a host of problems that plagued CETA for the duration of the program. The objectives of the initiative shifted repeatedly and significantly, and, in fact, the goals of the program were often contradictory. A Department of Labor report concluded that “in its brief history, from 1973 to 1982, CETA was amended eight times and proliferated twelve separate programmatic titles, parts, and subparts” (Guttman 1983, 3). The multiplicity of goals and the unstable nature of CETA contributed to variations in its effectiveness. Ultimately, there was a disconnect between federal and local goals, which manifested itself in a number of ways that were detrimental to the program. CETA experienced four peak years between 1977 and 1980 (Mirengoff et al. 1982, 52), then declined as political administrations changed and charges of ineffectiveness proliferated.

Early criticism of the CETA program was aimed at the practices of “creaming,” or hiring on the basis of personal or political interests, and “substitution,” or employing CETA workers in government positions that would have otherwise been funded by state and

local monies. In addition, there were complaints that project operators were employing ineligible individuals and/or employing them for lengths of time that exceeded the limitations provided by the act. Accusations of fraud and abuse were common.

In delegating administrative control of public funds to so many agencies, the federal government failed to establish firm requirements for recordkeeping and reporting. As the National Commission for Manpower Policy noted in its third annual report to the president and the Congress in 1978, the lack of an adequate “management information system” prevented the federal government and the prime sponsors alike from properly evaluating the system, making the task of assuring an efficient and effective use of public money impossible. As a result, CETA was “judged on the basis of isolated newspaper accounts rather than on the basis of what it [was] accomplishing” (1978, 8). This lack of structure, as well as the diffusion of data collection responsibilities among so many prime sponsors, likely led to the scarcity of information detailing the allocation of CETA funds to projects specifically related to the arts.

In its annual reports, the National Commission on Manpower Policy strongly urged the establishment of stronger accountability measures that would require prime sponsors to better monitor and analyze the effectiveness of their programs (1977, 1978). The 1978 amendments to CETA incorporated an increased emphasis on “ensuring compliance with national policies” (National Research Council 1980, 8). This shift resulted in a large increase in the number of administrative tasks—and, therefore, overhead costs—and a reduction in flexibility, which was one of the main aims of the act. Moreover, the increased possibility of liability reduced the incentive to participate. These amendments also reflected another shift in program goals, as CETA began to encourage the

increased participation of the private sector. Unfortunately, as the National Research Council noted, by the end of the 1970s there remained “no consistency” in the way sponsors reported “the number of terminations and placements and even the number enrolled” (1980, 20). The National Research Council stated that “repeated changes in policy, program direction, and funding levels” had kept the CETA system “in turmoil” since its inception. “The 1978 provisions,” concluded the report, “were particularly traumatic” (1980, 142). Over time, the government’s attempts to contain CETA’s problems essentially recentralized administration of the program to a large extent and contributed to the instability of the program.

BENEFITS FOR THE ARTS

Despite CETA’s problems, many organizations benefited greatly from its programs, and Titles II and VI of the act proved to be vital, if unintended, sources of funding for the arts. CETA contained “no priority ... for arts and crafts” (Delatiner 1976), but artists and arts organizations found ways to secure funding through the employment program. In some instances, arts organizations qualified for CETA funds by developing new projects. Barry Laine, writing in the *New York Times*, noted that CETA’s “legislative mandate [called] for community service and orientation.” For Rachel Lampert’s modern dance company, that mandate translated into “finding and developing new audiences,” and the company expanded so that it could present performances in new locations to nontraditional audiences, providing additional work for its performers (Laine 1979, D10).

CETA benefits for arts communities grew substantially in the mid-1970s. In 1975, by one rough estimate, \$10 million, or approximately 0.3 percent of CETA’s budget, were spent on the arts (Netzer 1978, 79). CETA expenditures on the arts increased once strategies to

Table 1. Appropriations for the Arts in Fiscal Years 1974 through 1982 (millions of dollars)

	1974	1975	1976	TQ ^a 1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981		1982	
									Original	Revised	Original ^e	Proposed ^f
TOTAL CETA	2,016 ^b	3,743	5,742	598	8,053	8,125 ^c	10,290	8,128	7,975	7,740 ^d	3,895	3,138
CETA ARTS	—	10	—	—	40	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
	→						200 ^g					
NEA ^h	61	75	82	33	94	115	140	142	147		132	

SOURCES: Mirengoff et al. 1982, 1978; U. S. Congress 1980; Netzer 1978; National Endowment for the Arts 1983.

a. CETA transition quarter, July through September.

b. Combined funds for Manpower Development and Training Act, Economic Opportunity Act, and CETA Title II.

c. Mirengoff et al. 1982. Conflicting figure of \$8,062 million found in Mirengoff et al. 1978.

d. Includes \$705 million deferred until fiscal 1982; excludes \$234 million rescinded from Title VI.

e. Omnibus Reconciliation Act, August 1981.

f. Administration's proposed revision of 1982 appropriation, October 1982.

g. Evidence regarding the \$200 million figure is inconclusive; it may represent CETA expenditures on the arts either between 1974 and 1979 or during 1979 only. See note 2.

h. Figures for NEA appropriations reflect total funds for programming and exclude administrative funds.

access the money were established, and by 1977 the amount of money spent on salaries related to arts projects had risen to approximately \$40 million, or 0.5 percent of CETA's annual budget (table 1).

Total CETA appropriations between 1974 and 1979 totaled approximately \$38,567 million (Mirengoff et al. 1982, 52; 1978, 294); the \$200 million in CETA expenditures for the arts in the same period represent a yearly average of only 0.5 percent of all CETA expenditures. This low percentage, however, is somewhat misleading. More than two-thirds of all CETA monies were actually spent between 1977 and 1979, peaking at \$10,290 million in 1979. Assuming that expenditures on the arts steadily increased from 1974 to 1979, it follows that, on average, anywhere from \$50 to \$65 million were spent on the arts in 1978 and 1979. Overall, CETA allocations for the arts were one-third of those of the NEA, but from 1977 through 1979, that figure was 43 to 46 percent, if not higher.² Many of the reports in the *New York Times* that laud CETA's support of the arts date from this period. Recognizing the trend, the Department of Labor appointed a CETA arts coordinator in 1979 (Dubin 1987, 17), and

by 1980 the agency had sponsored five conferences related to CETA and the arts (Lucero 1980). In a keynote speech for a media advocacy organization in 1999, Patricia Aufderheide, professor in the School of Communications at American University, noted that CETA had helped start "many arts programs for people who were living in voluntary poverty" (1999, 133–34).

According to Grace Franklin and Randall Ripley, CETA's "expenditure bulge" in the late 1970s was caused by the growth of PSE programs (1984, 22), which were supported by Titles II and VI. By 1978, PSE employment under CETA's Title VI accounted for over half of all CETA positions, and Title II accounted for 12 percent (Mosher 2004, 533). Since arts organizations found funding primarily through Titles II and VI (Dubin 1987, 13), they benefited greatly during this period of growth, even though the percentage of these funds that were allocated to the arts appears to be relatively small. Field hearings on the reauthorization of the National Foundation for the Arts and the Humanities Act (NFAHA) and the Museum Services Act in 1980 revealed that by 1979 an estimated "600 projects had been implemented in 200 localities,

employing approximately 10,000 artists and related support personnel at a cumulative cost of \$200 million" (U. S. Congress 1980, 167). Several witnesses referred to the important role that CETA played in providing artists and arts organizations with opportunities that had long been absent. Artists—including those working in the visual arts, film, video, theater, music, dance, and literature—found work where there had been none. Many felt that although the government had failed for several decades to adequately address the issues faced by unemployed artists, CETA was a "step in the right direction to employ artists as artists" within the community (768).

The Association of Hispanic Arts (AHA) was one of the many grant recipients that were vitally connected to a minority community and that benefited from CETA. The organization employed and promoted the work of forty Latino artists in New York through the AHA-CETA Artists Project, which ran from 1979 through 1980 (AHA 1979). Guillermo Lucero, the project's program developer, noted that the productions and workshops had helped "instill in our audiences the necessary confidence to overcome current social problems. Our artists directly attack the underly-

ing causes of apathy and demoralization which afflict our uprooted Hispanic communities” (1980, 8). At the NFAHA hearings, Elsa Robles, AHA’s acting director, testified that the project had been “extremely instrumental in identifying the cultural needs of [the] community and in initiating arts services in different areas of the city” (U. S. Congress 1980, 767). Between 1979 and 1980, the AHA’s publication, *Hispanic Arts*, ran occasional reports of the experiences of CETA artists and projects. These reports were part of AHA’s ongoing effort to track government funding of the arts and to encourage minority institutions to take advantage of the wide variety of programs that could better the lives of artists and improve their communities. With the demise of CETA, these efforts focused increasingly on the NEA.

Many organizations came to depend on CETA funds in just a few short years. In 1980, for example, CETA monies accounted for \$43,000, or 66 percent, of the Greater Patterson (New Jersey) Arts Council’s \$65,000 annual budget (Ripmaster 1981, 28). That same year a spokesman for New York’s cultural affairs department said that the “loss of CETA jobs would curtail the effectiveness of their organizations” (Fraser 1980, C24). Yet testimony at the NFAHA field hearings consistently indicated that CETA eligibility requirements were too strict, and that a host of limitations made it difficult for artists and arts organizations to benefit from the program. Many of those who testified supported alternative legislation, recently proposed by Congressman Ted Weiss, in the hope that it would provide assistance where CETA had failed.³ In response to criticism of the CETA program, Weiss commented that “it’s not that the CETA program has assumed restrictive forms. It’s that it was not intended to be an artists’ program, so it’s remarkable that it’s been able to be adapted for artists’ programs at all” (U. S. Congress 1980, 215).

Support for the arts, which had experienced a general period of growth beginning in the mid-1960s, began to drop in the late 1970s, as did support for many other social programs. Accordingly, the assistance that artists received through CETA declined steadily after 1979. One of the largest CETA arts programs, Chicago’s Artists-in-Residence (AIR) program, “starved to extinction as the flow of federal monies slowed to a trickle” (Dubin 1987, 184). CETA had failed to adequately remedy what appeared to be an inefficient use of taxpayers’ dollars, and, as Dubin noted, “total elimination of CETA became a major priority for the national administration elected in November 1980” (1987, 84). In 1982, CETA was replaced by the Job Placement and Training Act (JPTA), which focused heavily on the importance of setting and enforcing performance goals. Neither the JPTA nor the Workforce Investment Act of 1998 (WIA), which replaced the JPTA, had components for the arts or for public service employment.

CONCLUSION

Although it was not conceived as an arts program, CETA proved to be one of the most substantial sources for federal funds in addition to the NEA. It provided artists with new possibilities and a sense of hope and generated an intense interest in finding ways to secure CETA funds.

Further research on this remarkable case of federal support for the arts promises to reveal significant ways in which a diverse community of artists benefited from a program that was never intended to address their needs.

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NOTES

1. These pressures started as early as fall 1977 when the Association of Hispanic Arts began organizing efforts to open up the NEA for Latino artists and arts organizations. See the articles by Marta Moreno Vega (1978a, 1978b, 1980, 1981a, 1981b) and David Medina (1978) in *Hispanic Arts*. Vega’s reports detailed the future of funding for Latinos in the arts.

2. Steven Dubin notes that during his research his “attempts to obtain information regarding cultural workers from both the local and national offices were repeatedly stymied; such records simply do not exist. Furthermore, even important aggregate statistics can be interestingly contradictory” (1987, 193). Similarly, I found inconsistencies in reports of the level of CETA funds that were spent on the arts. It is clear that at least \$200 million of CETA funds were spent on the arts by 1979. However, while U.S. Congressional hearings document that \$200 million were spent between the years 1974 and 1979 (U.S. Congress 1980, 167), other reports claim that at its peak, the community was being told that CETA was the largest federal fund for the arts in existence (Fraser 1979; Lucero 1980, 9; Dubin 1987, 17), exceeding expenditures of even the NEA. This would indicate that the \$200 million figure would represent CETA expenditures during one single year. Several of these reports either remain ambiguous as to the time period during which the \$200 million were spent or state that the funds were spent during one year (Goldbard 1983, 133). If this is the case, then the claim that CETA was the largest source of federal funding for the arts is certainly true, but only for one year. My research, however, leads me to believe that it is more likely that expenditures totaled approximately \$200 million over the span of several years. Dubin indicates that up to an additional \$100 million may have been spent on “arts-related” workers during the period that the \$200 million of expenditures were spent to support artists (1987, 193). Further research is needed to distinguish between CETA funds that directly supported artists and those that were expended on general program support. Such a study might reveal that in comparison to the NEA, CETA was providing greater direct support to artists, overall.

3. This was the Federal Artists Program Act of 1979, H.R. 5518. No action was taken on this legislation after it was referred to the House Committee on Education and Labor.

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