



# VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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## Transforming West Virginia Into an Arts Incubator

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Alissa Novoselick is the executive director of the Tamarack Foundation for the Arts, a 501c3 organization based in Charleston, West Virginia. She is responsible for oversight of the organization and the multiple small business services the foundation offers to West Virginia creative enterprise. Prior to her work with the foundation, she worked as director of development for Carnegie Hall in Lewisburg.

Novoselick received her bachelor's degree in English from the University of Michigan and her master's degree in business administration from Antioch University.

She has been named one of *The State Journal's* "40 Under 40," and serves by appointment on the Broadband Enhancement Council. She is the treasurer and policy co-chair for Generation West Virginia, is a policy committee member for Philanthropy West Virginia and is a board member of Fund for the Arts. She is also a graduate of Leadership West Virginia.

In August 2016, *Governing* magazine ranked West Virginia's economy the worst in the nation. Despite glimmers of progress, leaders across business and political sectors have crucial decisions to make. As we search for new ideas to diversify and grow revenue, the economic contribution of arts and culture on a national scale is notably disconnected from the value we place on this industry within our state.

The impact of arts and culture-focused business accounts for \$699 billion, or 4.3 percent of Gross Domestic Product – a larger percentage of the U.S. economy than the agriculture and tourism sectors, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce.

West Virginia has little research available about the creative sector of our economy. Due to the lack of available data, the Tamarack Foundation for the Arts conducted a preliminary statewide study to determine demographics and revenue streams for this industry. The study also assessed the experience of being a professional creative entrepreneur in the Mountain State. The study found that the commonly stereotyped entrepreneur in this industry – a female, older, hobbyist, and traditional craft artist – is not reflected in the numbers.

This research shows that:

- Four of every 10 entrepreneurs are male
- 44 percent are younger than 54
- The majority of creative entrepreneurs practice forms of fine art
- One in three make their primary living at their creative business
- One in five are earning more than \$15,000 a year

- West Virginia creatives are selling their work through many different channels, from leveraging online platforms to sales representatives

Respondents to the study were also asked open-ended questions about their experiences doing business in West Virginia. The resulting data heavily skews positively to people and place and negatively to economic climate and opportunity.

It is evident that West Virginia's natural beauty serves as inspiration to a wide array of creative entrepreneurs; however, many cite "isolation" when it comes to their daily business practice. The low cost of living is a positive, but one in four respondents plainly state that West Virginia is not a good place to be a creative entrepreneur.

The evidence found in this study proves it is vital that misconceptions about creative entrepreneurs be called to attention. There are a broad range of West Virginians representing our creative industry working in a variety of roles from fashion designers, furniture makers and graphic designers to architects and photographers. Moreover, in reconsidering the worth of a healthy creative economic sector, there is great promise for our state in acknowledging that the value of this industry does not simply reside in currency produced from commodity goods.

While the presence of arts and culture-based businesses does bring about a direct monetary return in tax revenue and job creation for our communities, these businesses also contribute significantly to the social fabric of places where people want to work and live. And, when we export work produced by creative entrepreneurs to other states and around the globe, we not only create viable business models for West Virginia



1) Nellie Rose Textiles creates hand-dyed silk clothing and accessories; 2) Daniel Riffle builds custom, 21st century furniture; 3) Mountaineer Brand uses top-quality, 100 percent natural ingredients in their beard care products



residents, we build an avenue to change impressions and break the pervasive stereotypes that exist about our beloved home. By promoting our cultural exports as our greatest assets, the narrative and understanding of business in West Virginia has significant potential for change.

The Tamarack Foundation for the Arts is ramping up new services based on the results of this study. Initiatives like the online West Virginia Creative Network and an industry Think Tank in early 2017 help connect creative businesses to one another. The Creative Entrepreneur Speaker Series, conducted through the end of 2016, teaches business skills from creative industry professionals residing across the nation. The recently launched Emerging Artist

Fellowship encourages West Virginia early-career creatives to incubate their businesses and stay right here at home.

Additionally, the foundation is scaling existing services to ensure products created by, and stories of, West Virginian creative entrepreneurs are exported to markets outside of the state. The Rural to Urban Markets program puts West Virginia businesses in front of the eyes of national buyers and presenters of artwork. Stories of participants are packaged and presented to national journalists who focus on important players in the creative industry.

This study is the first of the foundation's attempts to collect further data on this sector. When considering our state's

existing assets alongside the national economic impact of the creative industry, the research validates that this is a viable sector with significant potential for growth.

One respondent to the study said: "This state is in prime position to be an arts Mecca." As West Virginians look toward the future with emphasis on diversification, building the creative sector of our economy alongside other sectors must be a purposeful priority and investment. West Virginia has the ingredients: a rich history of creative pursuit in combination with a culture that is rooted in championing a resilient and industrious spirit. Increasing our support for arts and culture-based businesses has never been more promising – or more needed. ▽