

College of the Arts

Community Partnerships

An Impact Report



College of the Arts

Office of the Dean

Creativity in Public Life

2025–2026 College of the Arts Community Partnerships: An Impact Report

Welcome to the second annual College of the Arts Community Partnerships: An Impact Report.

At Montclair State University, the arts do not remain inside studios, classrooms, rehearsal rooms, galleries, theatres, or concert halls. They move outward—into schools, neighborhoods, public spaces, cultural institutions, professional networks, and the everyday lives of the people we serve. This report offers an invitation to experience that work and the public value it creates.

Across the **College of the Arts**, students, faculty, staff, visiting artists, and partners create experiences that open pathways, invite participation, strengthen belonging, and connect people through creative expression. From K–12 engagement and professional residencies to performances, exhibitions, design collaborations, public storytelling, industry partnerships, and student-centered care, CART demonstrates how the arts expand opportunity, deepen understanding, and enrich community life.

The stories gathered here reveal CART as both an academic college and a vibrant public resource: a place where emerging artists find their direction, communities encounter new ideas, and creative practice becomes a force for learning, connection, and shared possibility.

— **Daniel Gurskis**, Dean, College of the Arts

Creative Pathways:

OPENING DOORS TO ARTS, COLLEGE, AND CAREER

Creative futures begin when young people can see themselves in them. Through school partnerships, festivals, mentoring, performances, gallery learning, and hands-on workshops, CART gives K–12 students and educators sustained access to artists, university resources, and pathways into higher education. These initiatives do more than introduce disciplines; they build confidence, expand cultural and professional horizons, and make the arts feel attainable.

ART AND DESIGN DAY: A Regional Gateway to Creative Study

Nearly 300 high school students and family members from 17 schools experienced the Department of Art and Design as an active, welcoming creative community during an expanded Art and Design Day. Eleven hands-on workshops introduced students to multiple disciplines, while sessions for teachers, advisers, and families offered practical guidance on college preparation and creative careers. Visitors toured facilities, explored the George Segal Gallery, met current students, and connected with peers who shared their interests. Led by the department's Retention and Recruitment Committee, the event has grown into a major regional engagement initiative.



CALI PATHWAYS: Talent, Mentorship, and Access

The Cali Pathways Project creates a sustained route to higher education for talented middle and high school musicians from under-resourced communities. Through individualized mentoring, audition and performance preparation, workshops, college-readiness guidance, and direct access to John J. Cali School of Music faculty, participants strengthen their musicianship and confidence before application decisions become urgent. Faculty, staff, and student mentors help young musicians understand college options, expectations, and professional possibilities. Under Professor Tomoko Fujita's leadership, the project makes community engagement central to the School's educational mission.

DANCE FOR CHILDREN: Learning to Teach Through Movement

Dance for Children connected Montclair dance majors with PreK–5 students at a local elementary school, creating a laboratory for arts learning and future teaching practice.

Under Susan Pope's direction, university students designed and delivered collaborative lessons introducing fundamental elements of dance while incorporating multicultural perspectives and encouraging inclusion. Working directly with young learners challenged emerging educators to plan thoughtfully, communicate clearly, and adapt movement experiences for different ages, abilities, and classroom needs. Their work was recognized in the Montclair Superintendent's Spotlight, reflecting the enthusiasm generated through the partnership. A visit to a local nonprofit dance organization further showed students how community-based studios expand access.



THE AGE OF BLACK METAL: A Gallery as Classroom and Laboratory

University Galleries transformed *The Age of Black Metal* into an interdisciplinary learning environment for students and educators across New Jersey. Guided visits and inquiry-based activities invited learners from Paterson P-TECH High School, Bradford Elementary School, and School No. 28 to explore technology, identity, storytelling, imagination, and future-making through contemporary art. The initiative also served teachers and administrators through Voyages of Wonder, developed with New Jersey Educators Exploring the Practices of Reggio Emilia and Montclair faculty. Participants used observation, sensory discovery, and open-ended questioning to consider how galleries can support child-centered learning across subjects.

CHORALFEST: Young Voices, Musical Growth, and a View of What Comes Next

ChoralFest welcomed high school choirs to the John J. Cali School of Music for a non-competitive festival centered on musical growth, ensemble development, and artistic confidence. Visiting singers performed in the Alexander Kasser Theater, received a live clinic with Dr. Heather J. Buchanan, and joined faculty-led workshops on vocal technique and musical style. Each ensemble also received written and recorded feedback from Cali voice and choral faculty, providing practical guidance to carry back to school programs. Performances by Montclair vocal students, Vocal Accord, and University Singers offered a view of university-level artistry.



THE GOLDEN TALES OF HIP HOP: Theatre That Travels

The Golden Tales of Hip Hop brought live theatre to children and schools across New Jersey. Written and directed by Charles Anthony Burks and performed by the Children's Theatre Ensemble, the original production blended storytelling, music, and hip-hop culture for young audiences. Performances at Dr. Lena Edwards Academic Charter School, Demarest School, Ridgely Public School, and Montclair State's Amphitheater reduced the distance between university arts programming and the communities it serves. Meeting audiences in familiar settings made performance more accessible while encouraging creativity, literacy, cultural appreciation, and participation. Student performers also learned to adapt their work for varied spaces and audiences.



STRINGFEST: 250 Young Musicians in One Ensemble

StringFest brought 250 high school string students to the John J. Cali School of Music for a day of rehearsal, performance, mentorship, and discovery. Organized by Symphony Orchestra Director Kyle Ritenauer, the festival immersed participants in the energy and expectations of a university-level ensemble while preserving the joy of collective music-making. A masterclass with acclaimed violinist Stefan Jackiw offered rare access to an internationally recognized artist and an immediate model of artistic rigor and professional practice. Throughout the day, students worked with Cali faculty and current musicians, gaining insight into ensemble playing, artistic growth, college study, and orchestral careers.

DANCE PERFORMANCE IN SCHOOLS: Movement Meets Young Audiences

Montclair dance majors brought live performance into elementary, middle, and high schools in Newark, Paterson, Montclair, and other New Jersey communities through Dance Performance in Schools. Under Donna Scro Samori's direction, students developed energetic assemblies introducing young audiences to movement, storytelling, and the expressive range of dance. Performing in school gyms, auditoriums, and multipurpose spaces required the college dancers to communicate clearly, adapt professionally, and connect with audiences whose experience with dance varied widely. The exchange benefited both groups: K-12 students encountered dance as immediate and accessible, while university students learned how performance can educate and invite response outside traditional venues.



World-Class Artists

SHARED ENCOUNTERS

CART brings extraordinary artists into direct conversation with students and the public. Residencies, masterclasses, open rehearsals, public performances, and cross-cultural programs create rare proximity to leading creative practice—without separating professional excellence from community access. These encounters reveal how art is made, how careers evolve, and how global traditions speak to contemporary life. They also turn Montclair into a meeting place where internationally recognized artists, emerging practitioners, families, and audiences learn from one another.

CALI IMMERSIVE RESIDENCIES:

Artists Inside the Life of the School

The Cali Immersive Residency Program placed leading artists inside the daily life of the John J. Cali School of Music through multi-day visits featuring rehearsals, masterclasses, workshops, conversations, performances, and student collaborations. The 2025–2026 roster—Leyla McCalla, Samora Pinderhughes, Stefan Jackiw, Isabel Leonard, Kronos Quartet, Jazzmeia Horn, Paquito D’Rivera, and Anton Armstrong—spanned genres, traditions, and artistic perspectives. Rather than limiting engagement to a single concert, each residency created repeated access for students, faculty, and community audiences, with many events free and public. Students encountered both performance and process: how artists listen, revise, collaborate, lead, and sustain careers.



ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY:

Classical Theatre in Living Practice

A 10-day Royal Shakespeare Company residency brought RSC artists to Montclair for intensive work with students in **Acting, Musical Theatre, and Theatre Studies**. Workshops in text analysis, voice, movement, and rehearsal practice introduced students to the company’s acclaimed approach while emphasizing Shakespeare as a living, evolving theatrical form. Public events—including a script-in-hand performance of *Julius Caesar* and an open rehearsal demonstration—invited broader audiences into the creative process. Community members could observe how choices are tested, language is embodied, and ensembles shape a production, while students gained sustained contact with leading practitioners. By opening significant portions of the residency beyond the classroom, CART transformed elite professional training into a shared cultural and educational experience.

NRITYAGRAM: Global Tradition, Embodied Exchange

During a week-long **PEAK Performances** residency, dancers from India's internationally acclaimed **Nrityagram** ensemble worked directly with **Montclair dance students and local school audiences**. In university classes, the artists taught essential elements of Odissi dance, demonstrated the relationship between movement and traditional music, and discussed their communal artistic life in rural India. At Glenfield Middle School, they performed for approximately 500 students, answered questions, and invited young audience members onstage to learn through participation. The residency deepened a relationship that began when Montclair students traveled to Nrityagram's village near Bangalore, making the visit part of a reciprocal exchange rather than a one-time presentation.



RED BARAAT AT THE AMPHITHEATER: A Free Community Celebration

PEAK Performances closed its season with a free outdoor concert by **Red Baraat**, the Brooklyn-based ensemble known for fusing Punjabi rhythms with hip-hop, jazz, and punk energy. Led by dhol player Sunny Jain, the band transformed Montclair State's Amphitheater into an all-ages gathering where students, area seniors, families, longtime fans, faculty, and staff danced together. Free admission, an open-air setting, and an informal festival atmosphere made world-class performance welcoming rather than ceremonial.

DISNEY'S MOANA LIVE-CONCERT-TO-FILM: Families Gather Through Story

PEAK Performances continued its popular family series with **Disney's Moana Live-Concert-to-Film**, bringing university students and local families together for an affordable, festive evening. When rain required a move from the Amphitheater to Memorial Auditorium, strong attendance underscored the community's appetite for accessible, high-quality arts experiences. The program extended beyond a film screening: face painting, balloon art, children's games, food trucks, and live musical elements created a welcoming event families could enjoy together. Affordable tickets reduced barriers for larger households, while Montclair undergraduates attended free. Building on earlier presentations of *Coco* and *Encanto*, the series has become a recognizable connection between the university and its neighbors.



Creative Voices:

CIVIC STORIES, IDENTITY, AND PUBLIC MEMORY

The arts help communities remember, question, and imagine. Across theatre, design, performance, and public dialogue, CART students and faculty work with partners to bring local histories, environmental concerns, identities, and social questions into shared view. These projects do not speak for communities; they are built through listening, collaboration, and participation. By turning oral history, lived experience, activism, and public issues into performance and visual communication, CART creates spaces where people can recognize themselves, encounter other perspectives, and consider possible futures.

THE QUILT KEEPERS: Montclair's Fourth Ward as Living Archive

The Quilt Keepers brought Montclair's Fourth Ward history to the stage through a collaboration among Montclair State University, Vanguard Theater Company, and The New Jersey Play Lab. Developed within the BA Theatre Studies program under Dr. Jessica Brater, the project drew on listening sessions, interviews, intergenerational memory, and community research to center local Black and Brown experiences. Students worked with playwright Dania Ramos, community members, high school participants, and dramaturgs to shape a theatrical work blending oral history and fictional storytelling. Premiering at Vanguard in December 2025, the production activated memory through performance and public gathering.



ART FOR MENTAL HEALTH: Posters That Move a Public Conversation

A collaboration between the Department of Art and Design and the Montclair Art Museum invited students to create posters promoting mental health and well-being. Led by Stephanie Spitz, the project challenged participants from both institutions to use visual communication to clarify, humanize, and advance an urgent public conversation. Selected designs moved from the Finley Gallery to the Montclair Art Museum in May 2026, extending student work from campus into a major community institution. Three winning submissions were published in *The Normal Review* and received cash awards.

RISE UP: Young People Turn Experience into Art

Rise Up empowered young people from immigrant families to explore identity, culture, and aspiration through music, poetry, storytelling, and performance. The initiative connected Montclair State's Department of Theatre and Dance and Cali School of Music with Drew University, CLaSE, MFEE, and community artists and educators. Participants ages 9–17 worked in a supportive setting where mentorship and collaboration encouraged them to share personal experiences, strengthen communication, and develop artistic voice. Cultural background became creative material and a source of pride. The program culminated in a public performance at the L. Howard Fox Theatre, where participants shared original work reflecting their lives and hopes.



CHAMPIONS FOR THE ARTS: Building a More Connected Cultural Community

PEAK Performances convened Montclair-area arts organizations for Champions for the Arts, a public conversation led by audience-development strategist Donna Walker-Kuhne. Moderated by Montclair Film Artistic Director Tom Hall and featuring poet Jazz Szympruch, the event explored how cultural organizations can build inclusive audiences, strengthen relationships, and sustain a vibrant local arts ecosystem. Co-sponsors ranged from the Montclair African-American Heritage Foundation and Montclair Public Library to Out Montclair, Studio Montclair, Vanguard Theater, and the College of the Arts. The coalition made the gathering a model of the connectivity it advocated. By pairing field expertise with local leadership, the initiative positioned CART as a regional convener helping organizations share knowledge, widen participation, and imagine collective approaches to cultural vitality.

FLOW(ISH): Environmental Justice Along the Passaic River

***Flow(ish)* transformed Newark Riverfront Park into a site-specific performance exploring the history, ecology, and future of the Passaic River.** Directed by Dr. Jessica Brater through her research on performance, place, and community engagement, the project used movement, storytelling, and interactive elements to make environmental questions tangible through the landscape itself. Activist Cynthia Mellon and environmental justice organizations ensured local knowledge shaped the content and process. Rather than treating climate and river restoration as abstract issues, the performance connected them to neighborhood history, public space, and everyday life.



GARDEN STATE NEW PLAY FESTIVAL: New Theatre for Public Dialogue

The Garden State New Play Festival connects rigorous play development with community engagement around social justice. Co-founded by Dr. Jessica Brater with The New Jersey Play Lab and Jersey City Theater Center, the festival supports emerging and established playwrights through sustained dramaturgical development and public readings in Jersey City. Its distinctive model also cultivates work by community activists and organizers, recognizing the expertise of people engaged with public issues. Under Brater's guidance, playwrights partner with community organizations to lead generative workshops, creating reciprocal relationships between artistic development and civic experience.

Creative Futures:

INDUSTRY, ENTREPRENEURSHIP,
AND PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

CART prepares students to enter creative fields not only with talent, but with experience, networks, adaptability, and a clear understanding of professional practice. Industry conferences, public showcases, competitions, publishing connections, internships, and productions move learning into authentic settings where standards are real and audiences extend beyond the classroom. Students learn to present work, collaborate across roles, respond to critique, manage projects, and recognize the social responsibilities of creative careers. These initiatives show CART as a workforce-development engine for New Jersey and the region.

MoCCA ARTS FESTIVAL: Students Enter the Creative Marketplace

For the fifth consecutive year, Illustration students brought original comics, zines, prints, apparel, stickers, and handmade objects to the MoCCA Arts Festival, a New York City celebration of independent illustration and small-press culture. Led by A.T. Pratt with Andre L. Davis and Anthony Gambino, the Products and Zines course expanded to three sections and a larger student presence. Students independently managed their exhibition table, presented work to thousands of visitors, discussed ideas, set prices, made sales, and experienced creative entrepreneurship in real time. The festival transforms class projects into public products and requires students to navigate audience response, professional presentation, collaboration, and economics. Professor Pratt's MoCCA Award of Excellence added distinction, while students entered their future professional community directly.



M.O.S.T.: Emerging Media, Technology, and Career Pathways

Broadcast and Media Operations' annual Media Operations Summit & Techspo brings more than 200 students, faculty, staff, and industry professionals together around emerging media technologies and career pathways. The full-day conference provides direct access to companies such as Sony, LiveU, Blackmagic Design, Clear-Com, EVS, and Shure through demonstrations, conversations, and networking. Keynotes and panels connect new tools to the changing media and entertainment landscape, including New Jersey's growing film and television sector. Students handle professional equipment, ask questions of working specialists, and discover the range of roles supporting contemporary production. For industry partners, M.O.S.T. creates a visible talent pipeline and education-sector forum.

CALI COLLECTIVE: Musicianship in Service of Community

The Cali Collective prepares emerging classical musicians to build careers extending beyond the traditional concert stage. Connected to the University's Artist Diploma Certificate and developed with Music for All Seasons, the two-year graduate ensemble gives Master of Music graduates experience as performers, educators, and leaders. Under Professor Kathryn Lockwood's direction, members bring live music to community settings including Valley Brook Village for Veterans, Elizabeth High School, SAGE Eldercare, and Cranford Senior Housing. Performances are paired with workshops and professional development focused on communicating across contexts, designing meaningful audience experiences, and understanding the civic dimensions of artistic careers.



DANCE EDUCATION LABORATORY: Movement, Collaboration, and a Global Community

Montclair dance students joined a global celebration of the Dance Education Laboratory's 30th anniversary through a Movement Sentence Choir created in Kristen Bell's class. Using improvisation and collective composition, students developed a shared movement vocabulary while exploring how dance communicates ideas, emotions, and individual perspectives. The process required them to listen, respond, make creative choices together, and discover how individual contributions become part of a choreographic whole. Their work connected classroom learning at Montclair to an international network of dancers, artists, and educators participating in the anniversary initiative. More than a performance exercise, the project introduced collaborative approaches in contemporary dance education and practice, allowing students to experience movement as artistic language and a means of building community across borders.

DESIGNS FOR SAFETY: Product Design with Public Consequence

Montclair Product Design students swept top honors in the 2026 Designs for Safety Competition at the New York International Auto Show. The national challenge, presented with road-safety partners, asked students to develop autonomous vehicle concepts placing human safety and social responsibility at the center of design. Under Professor Denis Feigler's mentorship, Montclair students earned first, second, third, and two fifth-place awards, sharing more than \$10,000 in scholarships. Entries required renderings and models evaluated by industry and safety experts for originality, aesthetics, feasibility, and life-saving potential.



FIRST MOUNTAIN MUSIC FESTIVAL: Producing the Whole Event

The First Mountain Music Festival gave students hands-on responsibility for a large-scale live music event, from planning and promotion to performance, recording, streaming, and radio broadcast. Developed with the College of Communication and Media, WMSC 90.3 FM, Hawk+, and multiple courses, the festival required students to work across the roles that make contemporary events possible. Students across concert production, broadcast music, television, theatre, and design coordinated creative, technical, and logistical decisions in a professional-paced environment. The project culminated in a free public concert featuring local indie and alternative artists in Memorial Auditorium, with streaming and broadcast extending its reach.

CHILDREN'S BOOK PUBLISHING CONNECTIONS: Networks That Open Doors

Professor Christina Rodriguez-Unalt has built a network of publishing relationships that gives Illustration students access to professional practice. Through the Children's Book Illustrators Group and Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, students connect with art directors, working illustrators, and industry expectations, including engagement with Scholastic professionals. Montclair State also hosts the New Jersey SCBWI annual conference, for a fourth consecutive year. Student volunteers help produce the event and display portfolios to editors, agents, and publishing professionals, turning service into career exposure.



Illustration: Christina Rodriguez-Unalt

The Creative Commons:

SPACES, CARE, AND COLLABORATIVE CAPACITY

Creative impact depends on more than individual talent. It requires welcoming places, technical expertise, sustainable practices, attentive care, and systems that enable people to gather and make work together. Across its venues, galleries, partnerships, and interdisciplinary projects, CART provides the infrastructure that turns ideas into public experience. This final section highlights the often-unseen labor and shared resources that sustain a thriving arts community—from supporting student well-being and opening campus spaces to strengthening school facilities, circulating materials, and connecting art with science.

CART VENUES: More Than 70 Community Gatherings Each Year

Performance Operations manages Memorial Auditorium, Alexander Kasser Theater, the Amphitheater, and Studio 1200 as public assets, supporting more than 70 events annually.

Performances, commencements, lectures, conferences, and community gatherings bring thousands of visitors to campus and depend on careful scheduling, technical preparation, safety, hospitality, and front-and back-of-house work. Much of this work is invisible to audiences, yet it allows each venue to function as a reliable place for shared experience. By extending professional operational support to University units and external partners, CART enables events serving cultural, educational, and civic needs.



FINLEY GALLERY: A Year-Round Public Platform for Student Work

The Finley Gallery sustained an ambitious season of 11 exhibitions, welcoming hundreds of visitors and representing the breadth of Art and Design programs. The schedule included a juried exhibition open to all students, thesis shows in Illustration, Visual Arts, and Graphic Design, department award winners, and fashion illustration work. These exhibitions gave students repeated experience selecting, installing, contextualizing, and discussing work in a professional gallery environment. The public setting moved coursework into a larger conversation, where peers, families, prospective students, alumni, artists, and visitors could encounter it. Finley also served as a shared space across programs, helping students connect disciplines. Its year-round visibility makes student creativity part of campus and community life while building professional presentation skills.

MEMOIR OF A ZEBRAFISH: Art and Science in Shared Inquiry

Memoir of a Zebrafish brought faculty and students from Art and Design, Biology, Theatre and Dance, and Costume Design together to explore neuroscience through visual and performance-based practice. Conceived by Professors Cathy Bebout and Thomas Mueller, the project began with a Print Jam connecting Montclair State and Kansas State University, where students translated zebrafish research and the emotional brain into experimental printmaking. Exhibitions and a neuroscience symposium created dialogue among artists and scientists. The collaboration later expanded into a multimedia dance work led by Professor Maxine Steinman, integrating movement, animation, costume, and lighting.



RESTORE & RECHARGE: Care at the End of the Semester

CART Performance Operations partnered with the Red Hawk Pantry to distribute 150 Restore & Recharge Kits during the high-stress final weeks of the spring semester.

Offered at the Pantry and Bloomfield's Bear Necessities, the kits included snacks, study supplies, stress relievers, self-care items, and encouraging notes. Counseling and Psychological Services and Student Health Promotion contributed support, and community donations extended its reach. The project was intentionally simple and timely: it met students where they were and recognized that academic persistence depends on well-being as well as talent and effort. By embedding care within resources students already use, the partners reduced barriers to support.

MONTCLAIR CREATIVE REUSE: Materials Stay in the Creative Ecosystem

A partnership with the Montclair Creative Reuse Project redirected surplus Art and Design materials to local artists and makers rather than sending them to waste. Established by Brooke Garlick, the initiative created a practical channel through which surplus supplies could remain useful within the broader creative community. Its impact is environmental and cultural: reusable materials stay in circulation, local practitioners gain resources, and the College strengthens ties with sustainable makers. The project also reframes stewardship as part of creative practice, recognizing that material decisions continue after a project ends.





PERFORMANCE OPERATIONS AT GLENFIELD:

Expertise That Lasts Beyond One Event

When PEAK Performances brought Nrityagram to Glenfield Middle School, CART Performance Operations ensured that the school's space could safely and effectively support the performance. Staff reconfigured audio equipment, repaired and refocused lighting, and improved the fly system's safety and functionality. The immediate result was a successful presentation for approximately 500 students, faculty, and staff. The longer-term result mattered equally: Glenfield retained a stronger performance environment for its own arts programming and future events. CART shared technical knowledge, labor, and institutional capacity in a way that created lasting value for the partner.

Creativity as Public Value

Across these initiatives, the **College of the Arts** tells a clear and consistent story: creativity is not peripheral to community life. It is one of the ways communities learn, gather, remember, heal, question, celebrate, and grow. CART's impact can be seen in a young person discovering a future in the arts, a family attending a performance together, a student learning beside a world-class artist, a school gaining new resources, a local history brought into public view, and an industry partner recognizing Montclair as a source of talent and ideas. The College is simultaneously an academic home, a professional launchpad, a cultural presenter, a community partner, and a public creative asset. Its greatest value lies not in any single event, but in the network of relationships and opportunities these stories represent—and in the shared belief that the arts help people imagine and build richer futures together.