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CultureWork

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Articulating the Civic and Social Impacts of the Arts: The Arts & Civic Impact Initiative at Americans for the Arts

[Barbara Schaffer Bacon and Pam Korza](#)

(Note: Below article links open in a separate browser window or tab)

We know it happens. We have seen art save lives, cultural practices bring people together, cultural activism mobilize people, and artists activate the social imagination to make something new possible. While the potency of the arts as a catalyst for civic and social change is widely observed, cultural and community leaders struggle to measure it and make the case for the value of arts in civic engagement. Whose standards should apply? What evidence should be tracked and documented? How can hard-to-measure civic outcomes be substantiated? And, can they be attributed to our arts-based civic engagement efforts exclusive of other factors?

Through the **Arts & Civic Engagement Impact Initiative**, Animating Democracy at Americans for the Arts is supporting on-the-ground Field Lab learning to address these challenging questions. In our first phase we worked with an outstanding group of field leaders, researchers, evaluators, and funders [\(1\)](#) who share common questions about assessing and communicating the social impact of arts-based civic engagement work to coalesce knowledge and advance learning. The fruits of those individual and collective labors are assembled at **IMPACT**, a new component of a soon to be refreshed Animating Democracy website.

The IMPACT website (available in a beta version now) offers resources to help arts practitioners evaluate and report the social and civic outcomes of creative work. We like to say that IMPACT is *a storehouse of resources for those who make a difference through the arts and who want to understand what difference they're making*. What follows is a brief introduction to the resources that can be found there. We look to our users to help make the site vital and dynamic. Look to our conclusion to learn how you can contribute.

Evaluation in Action is a repository of practical materials that can inform evaluation planning and the design or adaptation of tools and instruments for data collection. The guide was assembled from many sources and fields and annotated by evaluator [Suzanne Callahan of Callahan Consulting for the Arts](#). It suggests that the arts can benefit from cross sector investigation to identify useful methods for substantiating impact.

Stories & Examples includes case studies, evaluation reports, and profiles that describe how arts projects and programs have been (or could be) evaluated and what has been learned about assessing their social impact. Evaluation planning documents offer insight to making choices about what to assess and how to collect data. Featured are case studies from Field Lab projects where researchers or evaluation professionals were matched with cultural organizations in a collaborative inquiry to explore how to gauge and describe social change outcomes of their work. Some examples include:

Making the Case for Skid Row Culture: Findings from a Collaborative Inquiry by the Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) and the Urban Institute

By Maria Rosario Jackson and John Malpede

Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) is a Skid Row-based theater organization, founded and directed by artist **John Malpede**. LAPD has distinguished itself by its longstanding commitment to making change in L. A.'s Skid Row community, particularly regarding the homeless, through theater-based civic engagement work. LAPD and **Urban Institute** senior researcher Maria Rosario Jackson engaged in research to develop a foundation from which to recurrently identify, monitor, and assess the cultural infrastructure of the Skid Row neighborhood. The framework enables Skid Row organizations and leaders who use arts and culture to see their work as part of a larger system, and to create an asset-focused narrative for Skid Row that may help shift or expand the ways outsiders perceive the Skid Row community.

Moments of Transformation: Rha Goddess's LOW and Understanding Social Change

By Suzanne Callahan and contributing writers Jane Jerardi and Caitlin Servilio

With Artist Reflections by Rha Goddess

Artist Rha Goddess's **Hip Hop Mental Health Project (HHMHP)** integrates performance and dialogue with the intent to help shift the cultural paradigm of shame and alienation surrounding mental illness and to create safe places to confront the issue and obtain vital information. **Rha Goddess** and evaluator **Suzanne Callahan** focused on the impact of the one-woman performance, *LOW*, and post-performance dialogues on audiences' attitudes, beliefs and perceptions about mental health and illness by comparing two complementary studies that allowed comparison of research processes.

Documenting Civic Engagement: A Plan for the Tucson Pima Arts Council

By Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert, Social Impact of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania

Grounded in a recent strategic plan, the **Tucson Pima Arts Council** is moving to advance civic engagement in the city and county through its programming, funding, and partnerships. TPAC wanted to know what *quantitative* measures are reasonable to use to understand the civic engagement effects of its work as an agency. In this paper, collaborators **Mark Stern and Susan Seifert** propose five strategies.

Art At Work: Assessing Civic Change

A collaborative inquiry of Marty Pottenger and M. Christine Dwyer

Art At Work is a national initiative to improve municipal government through strategic art projects between municipal employees, elected officials, and local artists. An Artist and Art At Work director, Marty Pottenger collaborated with evaluator Chris Dwyer of RMC Research to apply an evaluation framework developed by Dwyer to systematically define outcomes and indicators for Thin Blue Lines, a police poetry and photography project, which addresses the relationship between police, the public, and department morale. The framework's application over time can be used to substantiate the case for the role of the arts in civic systems and processes. Art At Work is an Arts & Equity Initiative of Terra Moto, Inc. with the City of Portland, ME.

In the *Theory* section, papers, essays, and articles on topics related to documenting, measuring, and reporting impacts for civic engagement and social change through the arts may be found. Several Arts & Civic Engagement Impact Initiative research reports and white papers are included such as: [Shifting Expectations: An Urban Planner's Reflections on Evaluating Community-Based Arts](#) by Maria Rosario Jackson, Ph.D. which suggest the need to recalibrate expectations around evaluation.

For those who are getting started with assessing the civic and social impact for arts projects and programs, **A Place to Start**, offers key concepts for understanding types of social impact and ways to get started in evaluating arts-based civic engagement work. Included are descriptions and definitions of common terms used to describe the kinds of change that arts and cultural efforts strive to make and key evaluation terms. Options for creating plans to evaluate social impact offer guidance to determine what evaluation approach to take, anticipate kinds of data to collect, assess resources needed, and whom to enlist to conduct or assist with evaluation.

A key focus of our work was to consider **Social Impact Indicators** that look more particularly at the range of typical social and civic outcomes common for arts activity. Twenty-three types of change are offered. These may be changes at individual, group, community and/or systemic levels and can be framed and tracked over short-term, intermediate, and/or long-term timeframes. Typical outcomes from arts programs, grouped into six categories or families, include:

- **Changes in Awareness & Knowledge** — what people know
- **Changes in Attitudes & Motivation** — what people think and feel
- **Changes in Behavior & Participation** — what people do
- **Changes in Discourse** — what is being said and heard
- **Changes in Capacity** — know-how and resources
- **Changes in Systems, Policies, & Conditions** — change that is lasting

Social indicators help demonstrate if and how activities are having a positive effect. They are observable, measurable evidence of change. Indicators show progress toward or achievement of outcomes. On the IMPACT site **Six Indicator Matrices**, one for each family of outcomes, offer sample outcomes and creative strategies that might be implemented to achieve them. These are amplified by examples of evidence that would indicate change and practical data collection approaches. The **Understanding Data**

Collection section further details types and methods of data collection including systematic collection of qualitative data and sampling.

THE POWER OF ARTS for CHANGE

A SPECTRUM OF ROLES

THE ARTS REFLECT

Artists and the arts reflect society. Attuned to the social, political, and cultural currents of their time, artists' work reveals untold stories and embodies and heralds the issues of the time. Artists' work enters the public consciousness and public discourse. Artists and cultural organizations are increasingly playing a more deliberate role in making social change. Beyond reflection:

THE ARTS ENGAGE

THE ARTS ANIMATE

THE ARTS INFLUENCE

A CONTINUUM OF IMPACT

**AWARENESS, KNOWLEDGE,
DISCOURSE**

enhanced

what people know

- Fostering reflection
- Making information inviting and accessible
- Deepening understanding of complex issues
- Giving voice, bringing forward new or different perspectives
- Enabling, enhancing, deepening dialogue
- Helping people see relationships among local, national, global issues

**ATTITUDES,
VALUES**

confirmed or shifted

what people think and feel

- Generating hope, pride, sense of possibility
- Expressing, clarifying ideals, values
- Promoting respect

CAPACITY

increased

what people have and can do

- Building social capital
- Developing creative skills and strategies for organizing and advocating
- Increasing the status of disenfranchised groups
- Developing leadership and persuasiveness

**PARTICIPATION,
ACTION**

promoted & effective

what people do

- Expanding who participates
- Increasing civic participation and engagement
- Motivating people to engage, act
- Enhancing organizing strategies
- Mobilizing people

**SYSTEMS, POLICIES,
PLACES**

improved & supportive

what change is sustained

- Improving access and equity
- Diversifying leadership
- Adopting policy change
- Improving physical spaces and environments
- Increasing sustainable assets

Developed by



**Animating
Democracy**

A Program of Americans for the Arts

in collaboration with the



SURDNA FOUNDATION

This framework of social outcomes developed with the Surdna Foundation depicts these families as a continuum of types of change combines two families – Change in Awareness & Knowledge with Changes in Discourse

In Conclusion...

It took years of research and infinite studies to be able calculate and report the economic impact of the arts with credibility and punch. We view the Arts & Civic Impact Initiative and the IMPACT website as foundational platform for articulating the civic and social impacts of the arts in powerful ways. More experimentation, research, and evaluation work is needed to devise sound measures and practical methods for evaluating the social impact of the arts in the short, intermediate and long term. Findings and reports need to be published and discourse among and between academics, artists, evaluators, practitioners, funders, and policy makers needs to expand.

We need to use but also move beyond logic models to adopt more contemporary developmental models for evaluation that seek to understand impact in context of community or systems change. We need to collect but also find ways to aggregate data—both quantitative and qualitative. We need to build casemaking data but we also need to incorporate the arts--the power of narrative and visual documentation -- to tell the stories and demonstrate the value and impact of the arts.

Please explore and utilize the resources gathered on IMPACT to inspire and inform your own evaluation work and research. Animating Democracy wants your feedback and we encourage you to share reports and insights with us. We look forward to adding your reports, resources and perspectives on evaluating the civic and social impact of the arts to the IMPACT site and finding new ways to advance cross field exchange and discourse. Visit IMPACT (beta version) at <http://impact.animatingdemocracy.org/>

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1. A **WORKING GROUP** of respected practitioners, researchers, evaluators, funders, and other field leaders developed a shared research agenda and identified opportunities and gaps in knowledge, resources, and tools. They analyzed and discussed the findings of the initiative's Field Lab and research in order to distill and disseminate findings. The Working Group included core consultants to the initiative: **Maribel Alvarez**, Southwest Center, University of Arizona; **Suzanne Callahan**, Callahan Consulting for the Arts; Chris Dwyer, RMC Research; **Maria Rosario Jackson**, Urban Institute, and **Mark Stern** and **Susan Seifert**, Social Impact of the Arts Project/UPenn. Other members included: **Kelly Barsdate** of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies; **Roberto Bedoya** and **Leia Maahs**, Tucson Pima Arts Council; **Denise Brown**, Leeway Foundation; **Claudine K. Brown**, Nathan Cummings Foundation; **Dudley Cocke**, Roadside Theatre; artist **Rha Goddess** (1+1+1+ONE); **Marian Godfrey**, Pew Charitable Trusts; artist **John Malpede**, LAPD (Los Angeles Poverty Department); **Eulynn Shiu**, Americans for the Arts; and **Marc Vogl**, William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. [\[back to text\]](#)

Barbara Schaffer Bacon and Pam Korza co-direct Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts that fosters civic engagement through art and culture. They are co-authors of Civic Dialogue, Arts & Culture: Findings from Animating Democracy and Animating Democracy: The Artistic Imagination as a Force

for Civic Dialogue. Previously Pam and Barbara worked with the Arts Extension Service (AES) at the University of Massachusetts/Amherst and serve on its board.

Korza co-edited *Critical Perspectives: Writings on Art & Civic Dialogue*, as well as a five-book case study series. She is a National Advisory Board member for *Imagining America*.

Schaffer Bacon is a board member of the Massachusetts Non Profit Network and the Fund for Women Artists. She served for 14 years on her local school committee.

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