

April 2016. Vol. 20, No. 2. — Creating Connection through Creative Expression – Eric Friedenwald-Fishman and David Fraher

Greetings!

We are pleased to introduce you to the Building Public Will for Arts & Culture Initiative, soon to be known as “Creating Connection.” The initiative is centered on everyday ways in which value and recognition are placed on the arts, culture, and creative expression. To help define these values and recognition the Metropolitan Group, a research firm for social change, has been working with Arts Midwest on national communications and engagement efforts. This current issue of *CultureWork* shares some of the findings of their research regarding how the arts are spoken about, where and how individuals anticipate or expect arts and cultural experiences to happen, and what acknowledgement of art and culture in daily life may contribute to broader social and individual health and well-being.

Best regards,
Julie Voelker-Morris
Robert Voelker-Morris
Editors

Creating Connection through Creative Expression

By [Eric Friedenwald-Fishman and David Fraher](#)

[The below links will open in a new browser tab or window.]

In 2008—just before the Great Recession began to devastate our national economy, before the federal government takeover of Freddie Mac and Fannie May, and before the banking and auto industries nearly collapsed—state arts agencies in the United States were receiving legislative appropriations that totaled \$354 million, or .011 percent of the U.S. federal budget (1) (2).

Just four years later, after the global financial crisis had reached its peak, appropriations totaled \$260 million, a 26 percent decrease that placed the arts at just .007 percent of the federal budget. This austerity occurred during a time of increased federal spending, with various stimulus packages increasing federal spending by 15 percent.

To be fair, state arts agencies were not the only industry to face such diminution. But they faced some of the most extreme reductions in funding, with crippling impacts on services, staffing, and sustainability. And their recovery, though positive, has yet to place them back at their pre-recession level in direct appropriations—a reality that paints an even more desolate picture when accounting for inflation.

In short, if state arts agencies are one of our benchmarks, the arts are being treated as a nicety rather than a necessity, something to fund only when the economy is at its best, and only then with conservative year-on-year increases.

Yet arts and culture are core to who we are. National research has indicated that a significant percentage of the American public reports that they regularly express themselves through or otherwise engage in arts, culture, and creative expression (3). They see that creative expression spurs innovation, conveys stories and experiences that others can learn from, helps us understand and appreciate different perspectives and diverse cultures, and so much more.

To address this disparity, in 2012, Arts Midwest, one of six [US Regional Arts Organizations](#), and [Metropolitan Group](#), a national creative and strategic social change agency, teamed up to lead a national effort to build public will for arts, culture, and creative expression. Since that time, this work has become a national collaboration, with a wide array of funders, arts and culture leaders, organizations, and networks increasingly engaged at local and national scales. What began with a leadership investment from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation is now a nationwide collaborative effort, with pilots in Oregon and San Jose, California; Massachusetts and Michigan in early stages of pilot exploration and development; and other locations expressing interest in joining the effort.

This article outlines a) our theory of change, b) key findings from the research phase, and c) how implementation is unfolding in pilot locations.

Our Theory of Change

This work is guided by Metropolitan Group's proven building public will approach (4) (see [Figure 1](#) for the five phases of this approach). Underlying this approach is awareness that long-term change is accomplished by connecting an issue with the deeply held values of the stakeholders that a movement seeks to engage. After all, people generally make decisions—and choose to accept or reject facts—based on their worldview and values. Thus, to be successful, the arts and culture field must first understand the following:

- Which stakeholders are primed for increased engagement in and appreciation for arts, culture, and creative expression?
- What core values do those stakeholders and the public possess that connect with arts, culture, and creative expression?



Take libraries, for example. In the early 1900s, Andrew Carnegie provided capital for building libraries, with the condition that the public sector support operations, spurring a boom in library construction. Over time, however, funding tapered off; in many places, no new branches had been built since the 1970s, infrastructure was crumbling, and library hours were cut.

Libraries revitalized their role in society by tapping into people's values: they became the gateway for opportunity. Libraries became more than a place to borrow books and media; they became places where people could learn how to start a business, get help with homework, and access naturalization assistance. Libraries shifted from being beloved but neglected to critical community resources and, often, local convening spaces.

As a result, there has been a boom in library branch construction and remodeling. Physical attendance at libraries increased by 32.7 percent from 2001 to 2010, serving 96.4 percent of the U.S. population in 2010 alone (5). Library attendance is six times higher than professional and college athletics combined (6), and higher even than going to the movies (7).

It is possible to revitalize a sector, recognizing that this change takes time, and that ultimately it requires cooperation across the field to achieve meaningful success.

Research Methodology and Key Findings

To determine the answers to the research questions outlined above, we undertook a one-year research phase in 2014 that was composed of national research augmented by quantitative and qualitative research in four pilot sites: San Jose, California; Michigan; Minnesota; and Oregon. Research methods included the following:

- Extensive literature review of previous research and public polling
- A national survey to measure and track public values as they relate to the arts, with oversampling in pilot sites and among economically and ethnically diverse communities
- Focus groups and informal discussions among an array of stakeholder segments, including rural and urban settings, and with people who self-reported high levels of participation in arts and culture and those with lower participation levels
- Executive interviews with leaders in communities of color

Our findings surfaced significant areas of opportunity for the arts and culture field to communicate and leverage its messaging more effectively. Key findings, as summarized in Figure 2, included the following:

1. **Connection is a key motivation driving behaviors consistent with our goal** . Connecting with our family and friends **is the dominant closely held value** and decision driver associated with engagement in the arts and culture. People crave opportunities to connect (or reconnect) with themselves, with their families and friends, and with their community. Arts, culture, and creative expression are seen as an avenue for accomplishing this connection.
2. **The frame of “creative expression” is more effective than “arts and culture” for most people** . Our research suggests that **the lens of “creative expression” is far more likely to successfully engage the public**, communicate relevance, and increase likelihood to take action consistent with our goal. We found that people broadly define “creative expression” to include everything from problem solving to artistic inspiration, and it serves as a gateway into a conversation about traditional concepts of arts and culture with audiences for whom that conversation did not previously have relevance.
3. **The benefits of engaging in or experiencing creative expression are very personal and real for people** . Focus group participants spoke to the benefits of creative expression, both as an outlet for their creative energy and passions as well as an experience they shared with others. **These benefits were often described in very literal and often physical terms** (e.g., “reduces stress,” “helps me unwind,” “makes me happy,” “gives me joy,” etc.).
4. **People under 40, women, parents of younger children, and people of color are key stakeholders for whom creative expression is a priority**. In fact, these stakeholders **see creative expression and arts and culture experiences as more important** than other stakeholder segments. Existing “core” audiences and constituencies, including baby boomers and other arts enthusiasts—who tend to be older, white, better educated, and more affluent—remain important to our field, but they will not significantly expand and diversify the sector’s stakeholders in the way these other audience segments will.
5. **Barriers to creative expression and activities are considerable, but not insurmountable** . For most people, arts and culture are perceived as a luxury or “nicety”, rather than an essential aspect of everyday life. **Many people are looking for opportunities to engage with arts and culture in a more active way** , and express frustration that too often their role is limited to passive observation.

Findings summary

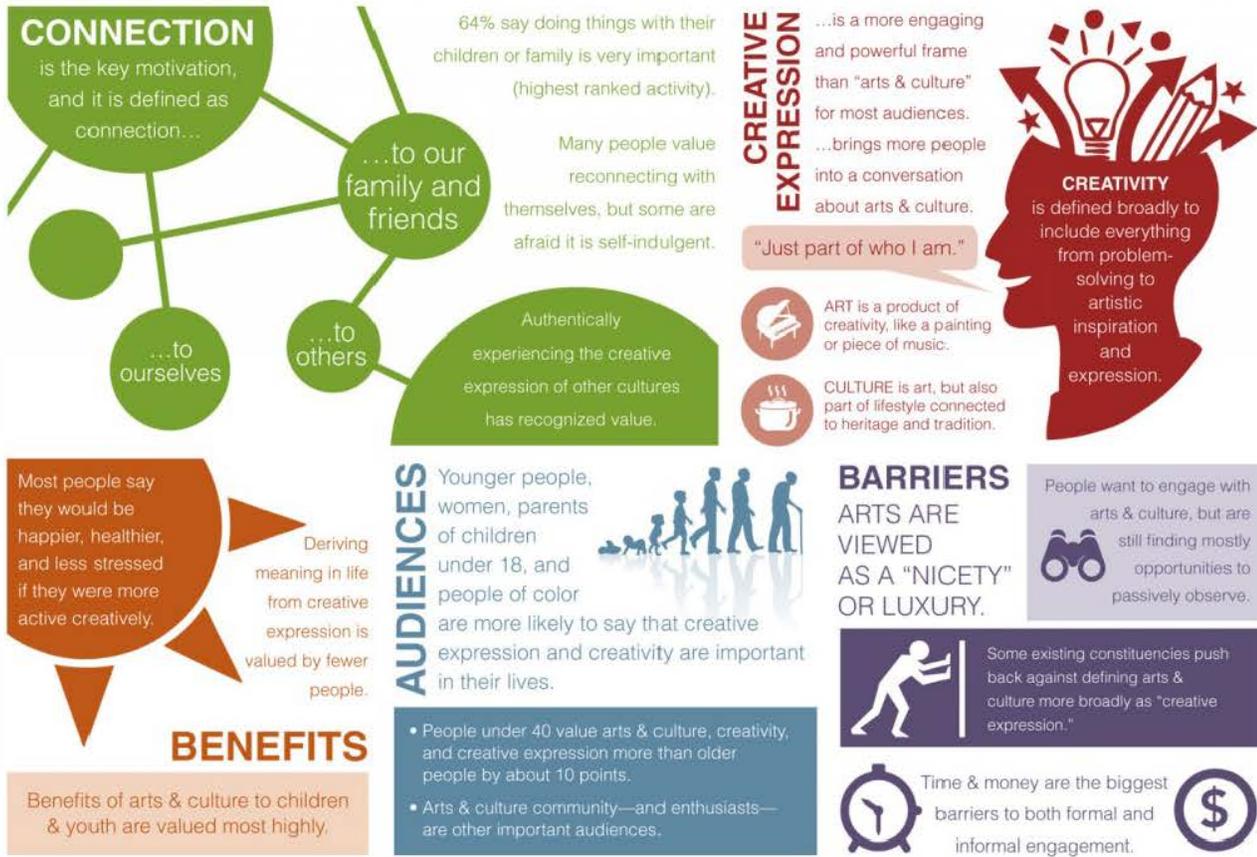


Figure 2: Key findings from the Creating Connection through Creative Expression effort (click on image for larger version). For the full research report, go to: <http://www.artsmidwest.org/creatingconnection>.

Creating Connection through Creative Expression

We began the implementation phase of this effort in October 2015, developing tools and resources and defining a training and technical assistance program to test and fine-tune the effort. These activities are currently operating in our pilot sites of Oregon and San Jose, California—communities that have volunteered to pioneer this national effort.

To deepen people's connection with creative expression, we are undertaking the following five activities:

1. **Articulating a message frame and making it tangible.** The research phase identified key opportunities to align arts and culture more closely with the existing public value of connection. To those ends, we are working with arts and culture practitioners to refine and build the broader message frame that surfaced during this research (see Figure 3 for the message frame). We are now using that message frame to develop detailed, customizable tools and resources for technical assistance sites to apply on the ground, to help test the efficacy of our messages, and to inform future iterations of the message frame. These tools, developed in consultation with arts and culture stakeholders, include a messaging guide, an elevator pitch, and a fact sheet for application in organizational communication; best practices for infusing the values stemming from this research into an organization's programming; a PowerPoint presentation and talking points to enable champions to spread the word; and, a training curriculum to help organizations apply the message frame and tools. These tools will be made freely available on an online hub for technical assistance sites and arts and culture organizations that wish to begin adopting these messages.

MESSAGE FRAMEWORK

CONNECTION

THROUGH CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Sharing creative experiences—and expressing our own creativity
—helps us connect with others and ourselves.

CORE

EXPRESSION

GROWTH

WELL-BEING

HAPPINESS

BENEFITS

Expresses our unique talents and ideas

Reflects, contributes to, and advances our culture and heritage

Provides outlets for our creativity

Is fulfilling

Teaches us something new

Helps us understand and appreciate other people, perspectives, and cultures

Fosters critical thinking, problem-solving, and collaboration skills

Helps us find balance

Connect with self

Reduces stress

Energizes us

Makes us happy

Can be fun

Creates lasting memories

VALUES

Family & Relationships

Health & Well-being

Learning & Self-Improvement

CONNECTION

Figure 3: Message frame overview.

- 2. Building the coalition.** Our initial research project both identified a core set of public values and outlined a set of primary stakeholders for this work—individuals who are most likely to resonate with our messages, join our effort as early adopters, and help “champion” those messages in their communities. Moving forward, we will conduct further analysis of these stakeholder groups to identify opportunities and strategies to engage them in this effort. This analysis will include creating a detailed “map” of the influencers for those audiences (e.g., school board members or education administrators who have a stake and influence in messaging around arts in education).

While much of our effort will be focused on identifying audiences and influencers in our pilot sites, we also seek to build support for a national advisory network that can represent and communicate with the broader performing and visual arts fields. This advisory network will be composed of arts leaders from within and beyond major discipline-specific service organizations and will meet on an annual basis to receive updates on the project.

It is our intention that this combination of grassroots and traditional strategies will help the project stay connected and relevant to the field, strengthen participating arts and cultural organizations, benefit other arts and culture organizations, and reach previously unengaged audiences that can champion the *Creating Connection* message within their communities.

- 3. Driving values and frame adoption.** Training and technical assistance are essential to the effective rollout of our messages. Working with local partners, we are developing hands-on training modules for customizing these tools to enhance their adoption. In addition, we are providing in-depth technical assistance with select organizations to gain increased understanding on how to apply and improve the tools. These technical assistance sites have been selected by pilot leadership committees to reflect the diversity of arts and culture institutions within the pilot area. In Oregon, for example, the seven initial technical assistance sites included the nationally esteemed [Oregon Shakespeare Festival](#); the [Portland Playhouse](#), which has been recognized for its deliberate efforts to engage diverse communities; and the [Steens Mountain Ballet](#), which is based in a county with more heads of cattle than people; among others. We will also conduct “train the trainer” sessions in diverse communities across pilot sites to help ensure that champions of this work have the training they need to share the *Creating Connection* messages within their networks.

At the national level, we will connect with our advisory network, national arts service organizations, and the broader field to disseminate research findings and deliver workshops and training sessions to their members at their annual conferences and gatherings.

- 4. Supporting the narrative shift.** In addition to the grassroots and influencer strategies discussed above, we will support the adoption of the *Creating Connection* messages by the broader community and media in pilot communities. We will support participating organizations in harnessing media relations (e.g., by providing sample copy for letters to the editor, talking points for use during interviews and editorial board meetings, story ideas and suggestions for pitching stories) and social media (e.g., by providing sample social media posts) to shift the way people understand, communicate about, and access arts and culture opportunities in their communities.
- 5. Evaluating and evolving.** Effective public will initiatives rely on continual evaluation to track engagement and message adoption to monitor shifts in how media and community influencers frame an issue; and, to identify new opportunities to share messages, lessons learned, and new ideas with project stakeholders and the field. In addition to conducting monitoring, reporting, peer learning, and refinement activities over the next 24 months, we will replicate the national survey (as conducted in 2014) at the end of the first two years of the implementation phase. This survey will allow us to begin to track any early progress as a result of this initiative.

Additionally, we are exploring opportunities to expand our effort to additional communities across the United States. We intend to collaborate with areas of the country we have not yet engaged—Mid-Atlantic, Southeast, and Southwest—to ensure we understand and account for regional differences in messaging and strategic approach. Communities that join the effort in the coming months will get full access to a qualitative research package (focus groups,

interviews, etc.). They will also be involved in our localized efforts to create messages, build coalitions, and drive adoption.

Building public will for arts and culture as a recognized, valued, and expected part of everyday life will not happen overnight. It will take a coordinated and sustained effort over a period of time. But we believe the values alignment, strategic approach, and message framework articulated here hold the best hope of achieving our goal.

When we're successful, what will change? We will see new arts organizations engaging new audiences, both in their venues and in community; arts organizations will offer new programs that will appeal to people's core value for creating connection through creative expression; arts will play a more central role in education; and we'll see public values for creative expression reflected in discourse and decision-making—including for funding. In short, perceptions will shift such that creative expression, arts and culture will be seen as a critical component of our lives—a necessity, not just a nicety.

To learn about how you can bring this effort to your state or to connect with current efforts in San Jose, California; Massachusetts; Michigan; and Oregon, please contact Rob Sassor at rsassor@metgroup.com or Anne Romens at anne.romens@artsmidwest.org.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)

Endnotes

1. National Assembly of State Arts Agencies. *Public Funding Sourcebook*. Retrieved April 2016 from <http://www.nasaa-arts.org/Research/Funding/index.php>
2. Office of Management and Budget. Summary of Receipts, Outlays, and Surpluses or Deficits (-): 1789–2021. Retrieved April 2016 from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/Historicals>
3. Arts Midwest and Metropolitan Group. (2016, April). *Creating connection: Research findings and proposed message framework to build public will for arts and culture*.
4. Metropolitan Group. (2009). *Building public will: Five-phase communication approach to sustainable change*. Retrieved from <http://www.metgroup.com/assets/Public-Will.pdf>
5. Institute of Museum and Library Services. (2013). *Public libraries in the United States survey: Fiscal year 2010*. Retrieved from https://www.ims.gov/assets/1/AssetManager/Fast_Facts_PLS_FY2010.pdf
6. North American Association of Sports Economists. (2008). *The size and scope of the sports industry in the United States*. Retrieved from http://web.holycross.edu/RePEc/spe/HumphreysRuseski_SportsIndustry.pdf
7. Online Computer Library Center, Inc. (2010). *How libraries stack up: 2010* Retrieved from <http://www.oclc.org/reports/stackup.en.html>

[\[Back to Top\]](#)

Authors

Eric Friedenwald-Fishman is the principal author of Metropolitan Group's Public Will Framework, a model that builds public demand for lasting social change in a process that connects an issue to existing, closely held values of individuals and groups and leverages grassroots and traditional media strategies. He is co-author of *Marketing That Matters*, a book on marketing practices that benefit businesses and change the world, published by Berrett-Koehler and translated into Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Portuguese. He is also co-author of "Increasing Relevance, Relationships and Results: Principles & Practices for Effective Multicultural Communication." Eric is an invited monthly contributor to *Stanford Social Innovation Review* online. He is in frequent demand at regional, national,

and international symposia as a keynote speaker, workshop presenter, and teacher.

For the past 38 years, **David J. Fraher** has directed his creative skill to building and leading arts organizations and programs throughout the United States. In 1983 he joined what was then the Affiliated State Arts Agencies of the Upper Midwest as its Executive Director, and subsequently led its merger with Great Lakes Arts Alliance, creating Arts Midwest in 1985. He has been chief executive of the organization since that time. Under David's leadership, Arts Midwest works in close partnership with an array of public and private supporters to deliver a diverse portfolio of programs including performing arts tours and presentations; arts education activities; visual arts exhibitions; international cultural exchanges; conferences; and research and leadership development initiatives.

[\[Back to Top\]](#)