



SUMMARY

Building the Field of Arts Engagement

America's cultural sector is grappling with how to remain viable in a rapidly changing society, defined in part by new demographics, new technologies, and shifting preferences and norms. Engaging the populations from which it draws its audiences and support is an increasingly demanding task — but vital to the survival of the sector.

There is legitimate desire and need for cultural organizations to remain relevant — authentically meaningful and of interest — to enough people to sustain their underlying business models, and to allow people to experience the work they produce or present.

The common challenge facing all cultural organizations, regardless of brand or size, can be boiled down to *relevance* to the changing world in which they operate.

A CALL FOR CONCERTED EFFORT

Cultural leaders therefore need to examine the mechanics of engagement in the arts in a concerted way, to distill lessons from their successes and failures, and to share those lessons — in short, to build the field of arts engagement.

But how well is the cultural sector prepared to take on this need as an arts engagement field?

A report commissioned by The James Irvine Foundation and written by Adrian Ellis of AEA Consulting explores this question. Drawing on an extensive literature scan as well as panel discussions, interviews, and surveys conducted by Elizabeth Ellis and other colleagues at AEA with arts practitioners, leaders, and funders across the sector, the report suggests there is work to do. Today, the arts engagement-field is nascent and under-developed in many respects.

EXAMPLE FIELD-BUILDING ACTIVITIES

- Training and leadership development
- Peer-to-peer networks
- Strategic grantmaking
- Research dissemination
- Efforts to refine relationships between different groups of actors

A NASCENT FIELD

While many have interest and incentive to build an arts engagement field, the field as it exists today is formative at best, based on assessment against the following criteria:



Shared Identity — People self-identify as members of the field, share similar motivations and goals, and generally do not work in isolation or at cross-purposes.



Standards of Practice — Codified practices, demonstration models, professional development programs, and established processes and organizations ensure quality and fidelity of implementation.



Knowledge Base — A base of evidence and knowledge is well developed, with experts and researchers focused on the topic, and systems of knowledge documentation and dissemination in place.



Leadership and Grassroots Support — Influential leaders and organizations work overtly to advance the field, and there is a broad base of support from key constituencies.



Funding and Policy Framework — Dedicated funding and supportive policy foster ongoing progress.

This framework is based on [work by The Bridgespan Group](#), which has informed a number of initiatives by The James Irvine Foundation.

Leaders of established organizations are aware that they are in a race against time in their re-engineering and reorientation and that they must reflect on what is essential to their mission and what is peripheral. Alongside them has emerged a cohort of organizations without the distinctions or burdens of legacy organizations, but that rarely have the assets to invest in organizational development. The issue is whether and how one might deepen the dialogue between these two cohorts.



ARTS PRACTITIONERS SAY:

The arts engagement field is “evolving in an organic, mish-mashy way...”

“My staff would absolutely benefit from learning practice. It’s difficult to think of where they can go to hone their skills.”

THREE POTENTIAL PATHS FORWARD

Given the urgency and shared interest in engaging more people more deeply in arts, and the possibilities presented by a field devoted to this work, this study proposes three potential paths forward.

1. REFORM AGENDA

Bring engagement nearer the center of concerns for established nonprofit arts organizations.

This might involve:

- Convenings focused exclusively on arts engagement to foster knowledge sharing and networking across artistic disciplines, and between the arts and adjacent sectors
- Codification of good practice
- Knowledge sharing and dissemination support
- Tailored technical assistance to support organizational culture change
- Engagement mentoring program
- Engagement leadership training and development

2. CULTURAL EQUITY AGENDA

Prioritize arts participation as a means toward social objectives.

This might involve:

- Regular convenings and knowledge sharing focused on strengthening the art and social change agenda
- Building the knowledge base, e.g., case studies that explore the causal relationship between the arts and social change
- Developing a network of those working in art and social change
- Funding a re-granting agency to extend support to unincorporated individuals and grassroots programs

3. BIG TENT AGENDA

Advance the entire creative economy toward goals for both reform and cultural equity.

This might include reform and cultural equity agenda elements plus the following:

- Consideration of alternative publishing houses, small presses, and other media outlets, and inclusion of independent music labels and their artists
- Exploration of nonprofit-for-profit collaborations and case studies
- Exploration of effective ways to introduce cultural components into policy agendas of adjacent fields, e.g., mental health, environment, and economic development



Find the full report, including further detail on these field-building attributes and agendas, at Irvine.org/AEAreport. A companion summary of literature on this topic can be found at Irvine.org/AEALitreview.