

SUMMARY

Innovation and Impact: The Exploring Engagement Fund

KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM CONCLUDING EVALUATION

From 2012 to 2018, the Exploring Engagement Fund of The James Irvine Foundation provided risk capital for more than 100 engagement projects conducted by California arts nonprofits. These organizations had innovative ideas and a readiness to take bold steps to engage groups often underrepresented among mainstream arts participants — specifically people of color and low-income residents. The Foundation’s goal was to promote arts engagement for all Californians, with the belief that arts provide a distinct, powerful, and public benefit that helps create a vibrant, inclusive, and compassionate society. This goal also aligns with the intent of many California arts organizations to engage participants and artists who reflect the socioeconomic diversity of the state’s population.

Since creating the Exploring Engagement Fund, Irvine has transitioned from investments in arts engagement (and the arts in general), but the Foundation is committed to sharing what it learned along the way. This evaluation highlights the meaningful impact Exploring Engagement Fund projects had on participating community members, project partners, and the grantees themselves. It also confirms the original hypothesis of the initiative: Diverse participants are more likely to take part in more active forms of arts engagement. Further, it yields a rich set of insights, best practices, and considerations for nonprofit arts organizations and funders.

SNAPSHOT: EXPLORING ENGAGEMENT FUND

- 2012–2018 initiative duration
- \$20,736,000 total investment
- \$175,000 average grant
- 24-month typical grant period
- 113 grantee partners
- 119 funded projects
- 4,631 engagement events
- 959,755 community members engaged across California



Find the full report, along with a database of information about the participating arts nonprofits and their Exploring Engagement Fund projects, at Irvine.org/EEF.

ABOUT THE ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

Exploring Engagement Fund projects spanned arts disciplines and California regions.

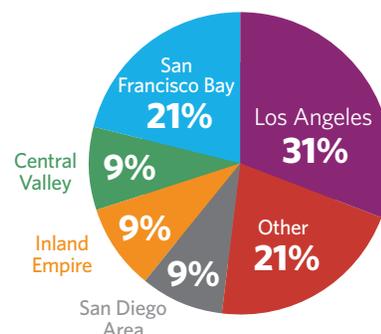
119 EEF projects

45%
performing arts

29%
multidisciplinary arts

19%
visual arts

8%
communications/
humanities/literature



Each grantee sought to engage people of color and/or low-income residents using new project approaches. These approaches were characterized in one of four categories, based on the intended project strategy.

Engagement strategies



EXPOSE projects (26 percent) engaged participants through one-time large public events and/or short-term pop-up activities. Examples included a dance performance in a public park and hands-on art-making activities in public places for people who happened to be walking by.



EDUCATE projects (15 percent) involved ongoing activities to build skills and creative expression among the same group of participants over a certain period of time. Examples included a neighborhood choir and a series of visual arts workshops in a low-income senior center.



CREATE projects (28 percent) raised up participants' voices, stories, and perspectives. Examples included community members helping to write and perform a play related to their lives and an online portal for community members to share video stories about their community.



HYBRID projects (31 percent) used a combination of these strategies.

Partnership was a core component of most of the projects, sometimes simply for sharing a venue and often as an integral part of planning and implementation. Project partners ranged from other nonprofit arts organizations and city agencies to low-income housing complexes, youth service organizations, and area businesses.

IMPACT OF ENGAGEMENT PROJECTS

The Exploring Engagement Fund created direct benefits for three primary groups.

COMMUNITY MEMBERS expressed themselves. Community members who participated in engagement activities reported greater accessibility to the arts. Not only were the activities free, but most were held in community settings, allowing community members to interact with art more easily. Community members found new opportunities to express themselves creatively, learn a new skill, or find a platform to share their personal stories. The engagement activities also provided a joyous and fun environment that allowed community members to de-stress, socialize, and take a meaningful break from their regular routine. Many of the engagement activities also helped further participants' connection to their own culture and/or build their understanding of other cultures.

“This event was a real opportunity for me to learn music. Growing up, I did not have opportunities like this. I started coming and started learning to read music, to play music. It was a great experience and something that stays with you forever.”

“These activities are helping our kids develop a love for their culture and a deeper knowledge of their background. It’s so important for us as a family to know our Hispanic culture and not to forget its value.”

- PARTICIPANTS IN EXPLORING ENGAGEMENT FUND GRANTEE PROJECTS

PROJECT PARTNERS met constituent needs. Project partners of grantees were able to meet the needs of their constituents, as well as expand their own practices and offerings through the collaboration. In addition, projects allowed partners and grantees alike to learn and reflect on how to create effective community partnerships and best serve community members.

GRANTEE ORGANIZATIONS learned and changed in meaningful ways. Grantee organizations increased their understanding of, and relationships with, community members and project partners, and leveraged those connections to further their other work. Reflecting on the learning from their projects, grantees felt that this work helped them pilot new programs, test different methods, take risks, and refine and confirm their future directions. Many grantees reported incorporating lessons learned from their projects into other programs to continue reaching and actively engaging diverse community members. The Exploring Engagement Fund was created to provide risk capital; it was not originally intended to build long-term capacity or change the focus of grantee partners' programs or mission. However, some organizations made meaningful changes to their overall organization and programs or are continuing the work originally funded by the Exploring Engagement Fund, while others adjusted their organization's mission to reflect commitment to more actively engage the community.

These perspectives suggest that the Exploring Engagement Fund had an impact beyond its original goals and timeline. Together these gains contribute to a rich groundwork for organizations and communities to build upon in the long-term.

ARTS ENGAGEMENT BEST PRACTICES

To achieve these impacts, Exploring Engagement Fund grantees approached their projects thoughtfully and refined them over time. Previous publications about their work conveyed key lessons and related practical tips to consider when pursuing arts engagement. Identified through interviews with grantees and reviews of their grant reports, these insights held true over time and across the 119 projects, which varied by strategy, arts discipline, and geography. For this reason, they may be considered best practices that arts organizations and funders may carefully consider when pursuing arts engagement work.

In addition, now that all of the Exploring Engagement Fund projects are complete, four new elements surfaced in support of the best practice framed as “Try New Approaches.” These additional nuances (noted near the practice they relate to below) are informed by final analysis of “engagement grids” designed by the research team and completed by grantees to describe their grant-funded activities in a number of dimensions¹.

Invest Time		True engagement with new and diverse populations takes time, patience, and commitment.
Build Trust		Getting to know a community and building trust are vital to planning and implementing arts engagement.
Partner Well		Community partners are critical to accessing new and diverse participants.
Relate, Don't Sell		Engaging new and diverse participants requires different marketing and outreach.
Go to New Places		Non-arts venues can help reach new and diverse participants, and often bring unique challenges.
Try New Approaches		New methods and styles can reach participants who perceive art as “not for me.” <i>Additions to this best practice:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider community perceptions• Intentionally focus on engaging diverse participants• Incorporate multiple artistic disciplines and project strategies• Actively engage people
Align Your Team		Engagement calls for diverse capabilities, training, and practices for artists and staff.

¹ See Appendix B of the full report for information about the engagement grid, other evaluation methods, and the analysis approach.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR ARTS ORGANIZATIONS AND FUNDERS

Due to its size, duration, and diversity, the Exploring Engagement Fund offers comprehensive examples and lessons about arts engagement. However, each organization, project, and community is unique — there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Several considerations emerge for arts organizations and arts funders to reflect on as they begin or expand their work in arts engagement.

Address community perceptions. Understand how the intended participants perceive the arts organization interested in engaging with them. If there are barriers, grow trust through community partnerships, grassroots outreach, relationship-building, presence at locations where people already congregate, and ongoing internal and external discussion and self-reflection.

Consider engagement approach. The approach to engagement matters. Be purposeful about who you are trying to engage within the community and about how to engage them. Incorporate multiple, active engagement strategies and multiple arts disciplines to gain and maintain people's interests, and provide opportunities to learn, self-reflect, and connect with others.

Build organizational capacity. If arts engagement is a new pursuit, build staff and financial capacity to facilitate focused discussions, grow new partnerships, establish advisory groups, and create the systems and culture needed to support this work on an ongoing basis.

Measure diversity thoughtfully. If seeking to engage diverse participants, clearly define what diversity means to the project and how to track progress. Measuring diversity requires deep initial discussion about assumptions and definitions, ongoing support to ensure information is collected using respectful and inclusive practices, and iterative reflection to ensure the information will be useful and meaningful to all involved.

Communicate and plan with intent. Short-term risk capital projects can have a positive impact, but it is also important to set expectations among participating organizations, partners, and community members about the intention, limitations, and timeframe of this type of project funding. Consider what constitutes “success” for an experiment, what could happen next for successful experiments, and how they may be funded or otherwise resourced over the long term.



Photo credit: School of Performing Arts & Cultural Education (SPACE)