ART AND CULTURE IN COMMUNITIES:
SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

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ART AND CULTURE IN COMMUNITIES

Arts and cultural activity is an essential dimension of communities and community building processes. It depends heavily on having an effective system of support – a system that is made up of the contributions of many different kinds of stakeholders, both inside and outside the explicit cultural realm. This topic has received little research attention despite the centrality of understanding cultural systems of support to people concerned with neighborhood conditions and dynamics as well as to people concerned with better understanding cultural vitality. This brief summarizes what we have learned so far about the support systems that operate in communities and the characteristics of those systems that are most likely to produce opportunities for cultural engagement. Because systems of support for arts and culture in communities, as we define them, is a new area for research, it is useful to begin with the overall framework ACIP has developed to structure our work and the place of support systems in that framework.[1]
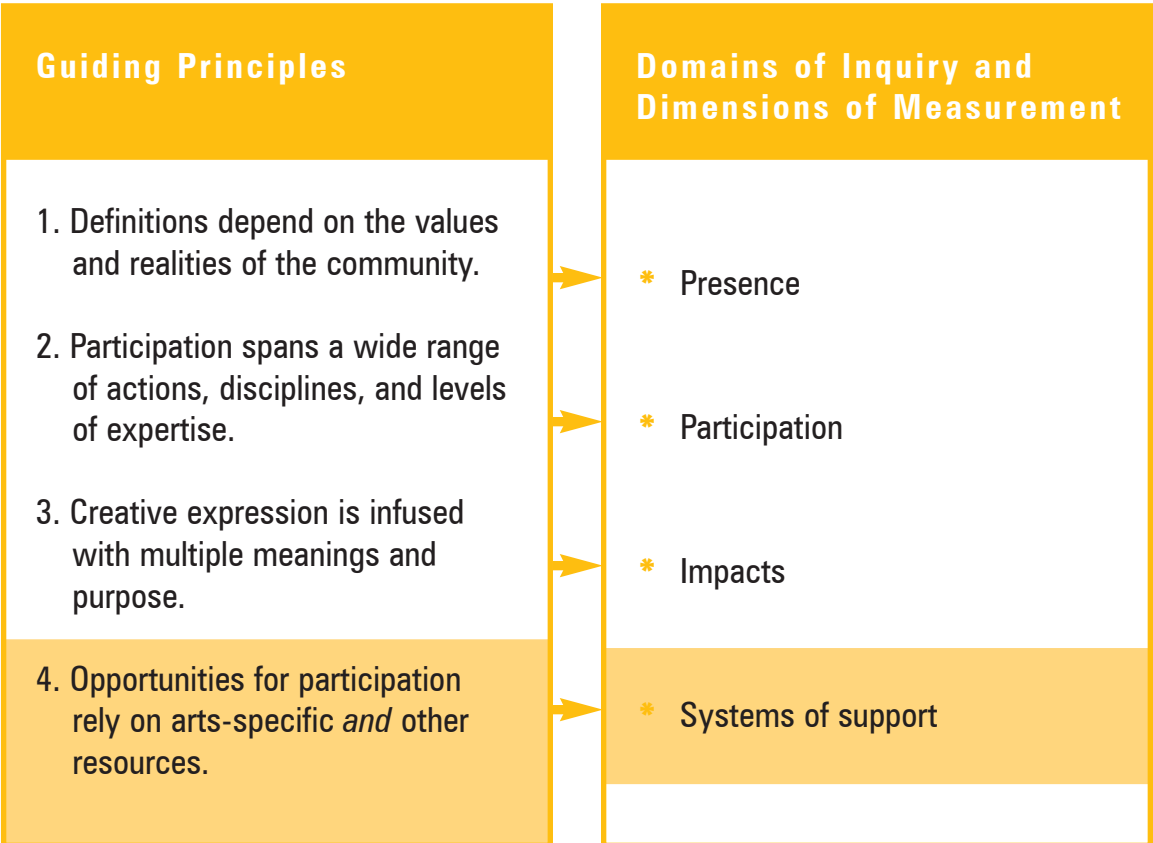
THE PLACE OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS IN ACIP'S FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCH AND MEASUREMENT

The production, dissemination, and validation of arts and culture at the neighborhood level are made possible through collaborations and partnerships among various types of arts and non-arts entities, including community organizations, churches, schools, and businesses. The networks among these entities constitute a system of support that is critical to a community's cultural vitality. Likewise, support systems for other issues – such as neighborhood revitalization, youth development, or crime prevention – are likely to have arts-focused players in them.

ACIP's focus on systems of support derives from the overall framework we have developed for conceptualizing and measuring the role of arts and culture at the community level. This framework has been developed through extensive fieldwork and document review – data gathering that included in-person interviews and focus group discussion with professionals and community residents in nine cities,[2] document review and telephone interviews with staff from arts and arts-related institutions, and on-site examination of selected community building initiatives around the country. ACIP's framework has since been further refined through an extensive process of idea development and debate in workshops and conferences of researchers, community builders, policymakers, funders, arts administrators, and artists – and through practical application by ACIP affiliates around the country.[3]

EXHIBIT A: Place of Systems of Support in ACIP's Framework for Arts/Culture Research and Measurement

Guiding Principles	Domains of Inquiry and Dimensions of Measurement
1. Definitions depend on the values and realities of the community.	* Presence
2. Participation spans a wide range of actions, disciplines, and levels of expertise.	* Participation
3. Creative expression is infused with multiple meanings and purpose.	* Impacts
4. Opportunities for participation rely on arts-specific *and* other resources.	* Systems of support

Our framework for arts and culture research and measurement has two major parts:

* Four guiding principles.

* A set of parameters that serve as both domains of inquiry (for conceptualization and classification) and dimensions of measurement (for documentation, data gathering, and indicator development).

The rationale for focusing on systems of support is given in guiding principle #4 (see left panel of exhibit A) – *opportunities for participation rely on arts-specific and other resources*. This principle leads directly to the inclusion of systems of support in our list of research and measurement parameters (see right panel of exhibit A). What we have learned so far about arts and culture systems of support follows.

PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS ARE AT THE HEART OF SUPPORT SYSTEMS

ACIP found no well-developed research models to help us capture the essential elements of arts and culture systems of support at the neighborhood level.[4] Nor did we find established theories about how such systems operate. However, through work with local affiliates, ACIP has begun to identify the most likely kinds of players in these systems. We have also begun to discern important characteristics of the partnerships, collaborations, and connections that are central to those systems.

Based on ACIP research and previous studies about comprehensive community initiatives, we know that the collaborations on which systems of support depend can take a variety of forms:[5]

*   **Imposed or organic.** They can be orchestrated by an external entity (e.g., funder) or developed by the collaborators themselves based on mutually recognized strengths and needs.

*   **Formal or informal.** They can be based on specific organizational roles spelled out in a memorandum of understanding or based on personal contacts and unwritten understandings.

*   **Short or long term.** A group of organizations can come together to sponsor or produce a one-time event, or group members may rely on one another year after year.

*   **Crisis-born or planned.** Collaborations can be formed in response to a crisis situation, or they may come together out of a shared vision of the future.

In many cases, the relationships among the various players involved in bringing a cultural opportunity to fruition are taken for granted by them and are, therefore, implicit.

AN EXAMPLE FROM LOS ANGELES

ACIP research in Los Angeles has explored the concept of systems of support and the processes, relationships, and circumstances that help develop opportunities for cultural engagement. For example, for several years, ACIP examined art-making workshops culminating in traditional neighborhood celebrations in East Los Angeles – *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead, an All Souls Day celebration), *Día de la Virgen de Guadalupe* (Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, patron saint of Mexico and prominent saint in other parts of Latin America), and *Posadas* (Mexican-style Christmas celebrations). These community celebrations were made possible, in part, through collaborations among various entities, including Self-Help Graphics and Art, Inc., a visual arts organization; Proyecto Pastoral, a social service organization associated with the Dolores Mission Church; organized faith-based resident groups at the (former) Aliso Pico Public Housing Development; the Dolores Mission Church School; the Aztlan Cultural Center; individual artists; and the Getty Research Institute.[6]

The neighborhood celebrations that ACIP examined provide an indication of the range of players involved, the kinds of relationships required, and the resources necessary in making possible various opportunities for cultural engagement.[7] For example, for one of the celebrations and workshops leading to it, Self-Help Graphics was involved in relationships with various organizations that brought diverse resources to the collective initiative. Both Self-Help Graphics and the organized faith-based resident groups provided artists to teach participants various art forms such as altar-making, *papél picado* (chiseled paper), and papier-mâché. Self-Help Graphics consulted with the clergy of Dolores Mission Church and members of the resident groups to identify themes that would inform the community artwork. Dolores Mission School and Aztlan Cultural Center were sites for the arts workshops. The Getty Research Institute collaborated by providing money, supplies, and staff to help organize and document the events. Many relationships were required to make the workshops and celebrations possible. Some were formal, others informal. Some were episodic; others were sustained for the long term. Some collaborations were just between two entities; others involved several organizations at once. These relationships among dissimilar entities were at times challenging.

FEATURES THAT HELP PREDICT
SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS

Based on the East Los Angeles case study as well as other research on community improvement strategies, we know that the best collaborations seem to be those that are purposeful and include one or more pillar organizations – organizations that are consistently part of collaborations that bring activities to fruition.[8] Effective collaborations involve relatonships that enable individual and collective goals to be achieved.[9] These relationships come into being and evolve based on mutually recognized strengths and needs. Moreover, they take the form and intensity that best suits the work. Collaboration of this sort requires organizational flexibility, time, and patience – requirements that are especially important because the organizations involved often have different cultures of work and are beholden to different (and sometimes incompatible) standards for success and excellence.

In Los Angeles, for example, the main organizations collaborating to bring art-making workshops in preparation for the community festivals to fruition – Self-Help Graphics, Proyecto Pastoral, and the Getty Research Institute – over time reconciled differences in terminology, technological capacity, bureaucratic process, and evaluation and documentation standards. They also found ways to bridge differences in opinion about how their shared projects should grow and change, or not, given the growing and changing aspirations of the individual organizations involved.

Initially, despite the fact that the social service organization (Proyecto Pastoral) had many art-based programs and the arts organization (Self-Help Graphics) had been involved in the community for decades, people from the arts side had difficulty understanding the priorities and language from the social service fields and vice versa. People from the arts field did not fully understand reporting requirements tied to social service grants. People in the social services field did not fully understand the needs and priorities related to the creative process as led by artists and the presentation standards held by the arts organizations. And the specific requirements related to arts supply and presentation needs (including lighting, sound, and such) were unfamiliar to the people in social services. Joint debriefing sessions and openness among staff and leaders from the various organizations were key to surfacing and addressing these and similar tensions.

INEVITABILITY OF TENSIONS

Tensions like these are virtually inevitable in arts and culture-related collaborations, particularly those that are long term. But patience, commitment, and mediation (often internal but sometimes external as well) can help close, or at least render surmountable, the language and practice chasms that stand in the way of success. People involved in a successful collaboration learn new terminology, come to understand the priorities and resources of others, and in the process invent their own collective terms, practices, and standards of success.

But new hybrid measures of success can create their own problems, in that they can be inconsistent with standard methods of evaluation in particular fields. While the parties collaborating across disciplines or fields may create their own terminology and measures of success, some of the entities (often the private and public funders) to which they are accountable may not be aware of, or not subscribe to, the hybrid measures of success that the parties have agreed on. Moreover, collaborations that rely largely on the commitment of specific individuals are at risk if those individuals leave their organizations or are encumbered by other duties.

IMPLICATIONS

Even though the notion of arts and culture systems of support at the community level is still at a very early stage of development, what we know so far already has implications for practitioners, policymakers or funders, and researchers.

Practitioners, policymakers, and funders can raise the chance of long-term success in two major ways:

* They can work to become more conscious of the ways in which various entities such as arts and other kinds of community organizations rely on collaborations to do their work.
* They can ask specific questions about how the capacity for strategic collaboration might be strengthened.

For researchers, a systems approach to understanding support for arts, culture, and creativity at the neighborhood level poses several conceptual and methodological challenges:

* There is likely to be a trade-off between a more complete picture of how things work at the local level and the ability to distinguish analytically among various discrete elements in a system.

* A systems approach complicates the establishment of causal relationships and identification of the impacts of community-based arts activities.

* Pragmatic program evaluation and assessment becomes more difficult.

Despite these challenges, an approach that recognizes more adequately the ways in which both the arts and community building work in neighborhoods is imperative to any true understanding and sustainability of the role of arts, culture, and creativity in communities.

NOTES

1. For a general "systems view" of creativity see Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi,, "Society, Culture, Person: A Systems View of Creativity," in *The Nature of Creativity*, edited by R.J. Sternberg. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 325-39).

2. Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Los Angeles, Oakland, Providence, and Washington, D.C.

3. ACIP works with local affiliates in seven places: Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco Bay Area, Philadelphia, Providence, and Washington, D.C. ACIP and affiliates work on a variety of projects, with foci ranging from citywide to neighborhood-specific levels. Our aim with the affiliate work is to create tools and methods that can be adopted or adapted by other practitioners in the community arts and community-building related fields.

4. Although recent research has begun to investigate collaborations among arts organizations, there is very little empirical research about community arts and cultural systems of support, including arts and non-arts organizations. See Francie Ostrower, *Cultural Collaborations: Building Partnerships for Arts Participation* (Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute, 2003).

5. Adapted from Maria-Rosario Jackson and Peter Marris, "Comprehensive Community Initiatives: Overview of and Emerging Community Improvement Orientation." Paper presented at Urban Institute Community Building Seminar Series, 1996, pp. 27-30. Also see Maria-Rosario Jackson, "Coming to the Center of Community Life," in *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*. (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums 2002).

6. The research was also part of the Getty Research Institute's Participation Project: Artists, Communities and Cultural Citizenship, directed by Josephine Ramirez.

7. Although this example emphasizes organizational ties, the community celebrations were also supported by a range of relationships among individuals.

8. Pillar organizations in a cultural system of support characteristically enable many different forms of cultural participation at different skill levels (e.g., making art, learning art, and audience participation). They have reach into multiple spheres of power and resources, play a catalytic role, and have the capacity to convene dissimilar entities (e.g. arts organizations, social service agencies, churches, and individual artists). Moreover they play an important role in validating both the creative activity pursued as well as the collaboration necessary to bring it to fruition.

9. See Jackson, 2002.

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