

**ART AND CULTURE IN COMMUNITIES:  
UNPACKING PARTICIPATION**



**Policy Brief No.2 of the Culture, Creativity, and Communities Program**



**The Urban Institute, Washington DC**

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**2003**

## **ABOUT THIS POLICY BRIEF**

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This brief is a product of the Arts and Culture Indicators in Community Building Project (ACIP) – the flagship initiative of the Urban Institute’s Culture, Creativity, and Communities (CCC) program. Launched in 1996 with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, ACIP seeks to integrate arts and culture-related measures into community quality-of-life indicator systems. ACIP is built on the premise that inclusion of arts, culture, and creativity is meaningful when it reflects the values and interests of a wide range of community stakeholders. This is the context in which the connection of arts, culture, and creativity to community building processes and other community dynamics can be fully understood.

The authors of this brief would like to thank the Rockefeller Foundation for support of this work. We are indebted to the many community building professionals, arts administrators, artists, community residents and our local ACIP affiliates for their contributions. Also, we would like to thank Felicity Skidmore for her editorial assistance.

## **THE URBAN INSTITUTE**

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The Urban Institute is a nonprofit nonpartisan policy research and educational organization established to examine the social, economic, and governance problems facing the nation. It provides information and analysis to public and private decision makers to help them address these challenges and strives to raise citizen understanding of these issues and tradeoffs in policy making.

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## **CULTURE, CREATIVITY, AND COMMUNITIES PROGRAM**

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The Culture, Creativity, and Communities (CCC) Program at the Urban Institute is a research and dissemination initiative that investigates the role of arts, culture, and creative expression in communities. It explores the intersections of arts, culture, and creative expression with various policy areas.

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## ART AND CULTURE IN COMMUNITIES

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Arts and cultural participation is an important element of community life and an essential component of community building. But delineating the full role such participation plays in the community is dependent on capturing the range of ways in

which people actually participate in creative expression – as creators, teachers, consumers, and supporters. This brief presents our findings on arts and cultural participation in the context of community-building processes.

## THE PLACE OF PARTICIPATION IN ACIP'S OVERALL FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCH AND MEASUREMENT

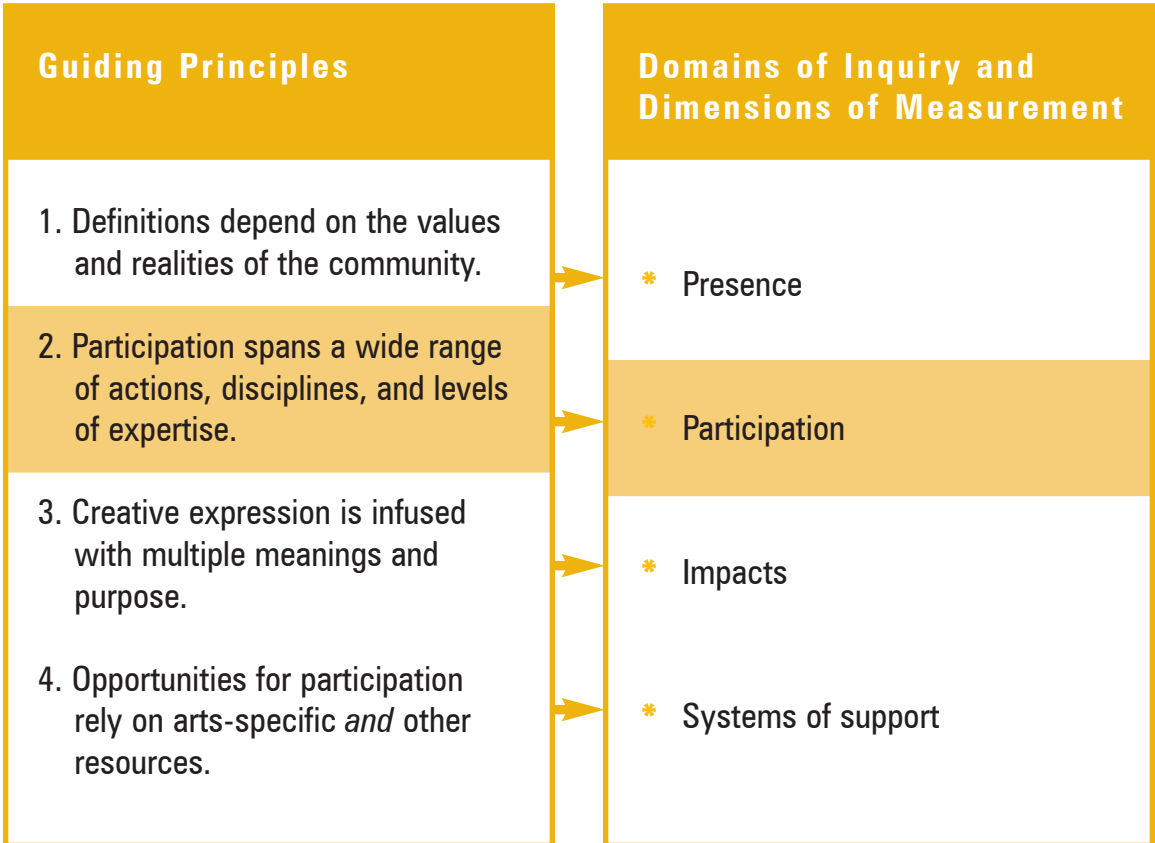
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ACIP's focus on participation derives from the overall framework we have developed for conceptualizing and measuring the role of arts and culture at the community level. This framework has been developed through extensive fieldwork and document review – data gathering that included in-person interviews and focus group discussions with professionals and community residents in nine cities,<sup>1</sup> 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. The framework has now 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.<sup>2</sup>



## EXHIBIT A: Participation in ACIP's Framework for Arts/Culture Research and Measurement



**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 concept of participation discussed here is referenced in guiding principle #2 (see left panel of exhibit A) – *it spans a wide range of actions, disciplines, and levels of expertise*. This definition of participation is what we explore in the second of our four research and measurement parameters (see right panel of exhibit A).

## THE MANY FORMS OF PARTICIPATION

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An example from Zumix, a music-focused community arts organization in East Boston, helps capture the potential richness of arts and cultural participation at the community level. Reflecting on how the organization might be considered an asset to the community, Zumix staff described to us an instance in which Central American immigrant women living in the neighborhood approached them about using the organization's space to teach dances from Central America. Staff agreed to let the women use the space and helped them with their efforts. The women recruited neighborhood children to participate in the classes and eventually decided to put on a show for the community. To do this they needed materials for costumes, background scenery, and so on. Strapped for cash, the women and Zumix staff approached local businesses to make financial or in-kind

contributions to bring the show to fruition. The performance took place and families, friends, and neighbors attended. So how did people participate? The women and their students were involved in making, teaching, and learning art. Staff members from the community arts organization supported the endeavor with their own labor and space. Local businesses provided financial and in-kind resources. Families, friends, and neighbors participated as audience members.

Comprehensive documentation of the multitudinous ways in which people engage in cultural activities would surely improve our understanding of community dynamics – volunteerism, giving, organizing, civic engagement. However, the breadth, depth, and range of cultural participation in U.S. communities are seldom fully documented.



## DOCUMENTATION PRACTICES

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The most common ways of documenting or measuring arts and cultural participation are limited to audience counts – filled seats – and periodic household surveys that also focus primarily on attendance at cultural events. Most efforts to document these forms of participation limit their scope even further by using definitions that exclude many neighborhood activities that ACIP’s guiding principles would encompass. Missing, for example, are the creative expressions that may be observed in public parks (e.g., drumming), in subways (e.g., singing or playing live music), on street corners (e.g., impromptu dance), or in private homes (e.g., sewing circles, amateur photography, decorative gardening, poetic writing).

Optimal practices, in contrast, would consider the many categories of

engagement in both traditional and nontraditional cultural venues. They would also capture the nature of the participation, as through the following kinds of questions:

- \* Is it ongoing or episodic?
- \* Do people participate as individuals or as groups?
- \* Is participation formal or informal?
- \* Why do people engage?
- \* Do motives for engagement change or evolve over time?

## LIMITATIONS OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

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Unlike the other dimensions of our framework, the meaning and significance of cultural participation has been the subject of a long historical debate. This debate has often been cast in elitist-populist terms as sets of dichotomies: high/low, formal/informal, fine/folk, classic/populist, professional/amateur, and the like. ACIP research strongly suggests that these are

false dichotomies that oversimplify the broad array of participation forms.

Our view is in line with other researchers’ criticism of narrow interpretations of cultural participation and with emerging research efforts that offer richer ways to frame engagement. Peters and Cherbo (1998) argue, for example, that the cultural policy community has focused mostly on arts

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participation in the nonprofit and for-profit sectors and has neglected the “unincorporated arts” as a third sector.<sup>3</sup> One consequence, they say, has been an undercounting of cultural participation. According to them, expanding the definition of cultural engagement increases participation rates from 80 percent to 95 percent of adults in the United States.

Similarly, in a telephone survey influenced, in part, by the ACIP framework, Walker and Scott-Melnyk (2002) examined rates of attendance at live arts and cultural events using both “narrow” and “broad” definitions of art and culture.<sup>4</sup> Based on responses from 2,400 households in five communities, they found that a broad view of cultural participation resulted in estimates about 20 percent higher than a narrow definition. Kansas City’s participation rate, for example, increased from 65 percent to 84 percent.<sup>5</sup> The same study also revealed that many of the people who participated in arts and cultural forms that are narrowly defined also participated in broader ways. Furthermore, the broad definition resulted in 60 percent higher participation rates among people in the poorest and least-white areas in the localities studied as compared with rates using narrow and arguably “elitist” definitions.

Broad definitions of participation, not surprisingly, also show many more informal organizations engaged in such efforts than do narrow definitions. A national study by the RAND Corporation examined the profit, nonprofit, and “amateur” sectors of arts organizations. It revealed that activities in the “amateur” sector accounted for 30 percent or more of all activities among arts organizations. Moreover, the “amateur” sector is the fastest growing sector in some places.<sup>6</sup>

Even many formal arts organizations, when asked about expanded forms of participation, report a wider set of cultural activities than often assumed. For example, in another RAND study, researchers applied a broad cultural participation definition in a survey of 102 formal arts organizations across the nation.<sup>7</sup> Only half (51 percent) were described as traditionally “canon-focused” (i.e., supporting the canons of specific art forms); another 35 percent could be appropriately described as “community-focused” (i.e., using arts as a vehicle to improve communities); and the remaining 14 percent were described as “creativity-focused” (i.e., engaging individuals in the creative process).

## LOCAL RESEARCH

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Emerging local research – data collected and methods used at the neighborhood level – confirms these national findings about the pervasiveness of creative participation. Researchers from the Chicago Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College (an ACIP affiliate), for example, conducted a study investigating involvement in the informal arts in Chicago.<sup>8</sup> They visited 86 neighborhood sites (67 within the city limits and 19 in surrounding suburbs) and examined community newspapers, posters, flyers, and similar postings collected from venues such as grocery stores, churches, libraries, park offices, and coffee shops. Analysis determined that artistic events – including visual arts, architecture, dance, theater, and multimedia – accounted for more than half of the posted activities in almost two-thirds of the sites. Focus groups, personal interviews, and year-long ethnographic studies about the motivation, behavior, and extent of participation in informal arts were also part of the study – revealing that people from a wide range of social and economic backgrounds in different neighborhoods participated in the informal arts. In the process, many of them expended considerable amounts of their own personal time and resources in activities such as purchasing materials and taking classes. In doing so, they also relied upon social resources – networks of family, friends, and other artists – as well as organizational resources provided by churches, libraries, and parks.

Further evidence of extensive cultural participation across different communities comes from a series of studies conducted by the Social Impacts of the Arts Project at

the University of Pennsylvania (also an ACIP affiliate).<sup>9</sup> These researchers surveyed residents in five Philadelphia neighborhoods about participation in a wide range of local and regional arts and cultural activities. Overall, 80 percent of respondents said they had participated in a cultural activity in the previous year, 69 percent had attended at least one neighborhood cultural event, and 60 percent had gone to at least one regional cultural event. There was also a strong relationship between local and regional arts participation, with eight of ten regional cultural participants also attending neighborhood events. Poorer neighborhoods had relatively higher local cultural participation rates and lower regional participation rates than average.

In an effort to develop better information about expanded forms of cultural participation in neighborhoods, ACIP worked to enhance the data collection practices of arts-related organizations at the community level. Such organizations are important because they are often the main source of information about local arts participation. In this regard, our work on participation has been geared particularly toward creating tools and methods that can be adopted or adapted by other practitioners in the community arts and community-building fields.

ACIP researchers collaborated, for example, with the Getty Research Institute and two local agencies in East Los Angeles: Self-Help Graphics and Arts, Inc., a community-based visual arts organization, and Proyecto Pastoral, a programming division of the Dolores Mission serving (at the time) mostly



public housing residents. These two East Los Angeles organizations were involved in a joint effort to prepare for and produce three community celebrations: *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).<sup>10</sup> ACIP also worked in the San Francisco Bay Area with the East Bay Institute for Urban Arts and the Community Network for Youth Development and some of its affiliates. This was a two-year collaborative research effort, sponsored by ACIP and involving arts-based youth development practitioners, youth, artists, researchers, and funders. Our work with these organizations focused on better understanding participation and its relationship to social capital-building processes.

In both places, we helped organizations reconsider their documentation practices and created new tools and methods for documenting various aspects of participation. In Los Angeles, for example, ACIP work involved creating a registration process for people participating in various arts-based programs, as well as internal program evaluation tools and practices that document the involvement of volunteers and collaborating organizations. As an additional means of more comprehensively capturing cultural participation, staff at Self-Help in Los Angeles worked with ACIP to develop *community curatorial procedures* – practices intended to document the creative process, the art product itself, and the use of the art product. Such procedures involve combining

interviews and focus group discussions with participants as well as photographic and video documentation.

ACIP's work in Los Angeles reveals both a fuller range of cultural involvement and more connections to community-building efforts than previously identified. In settings such as mask-making and altar-making workshops tied to *Día de los Muertos*, for example, we found a *continuum of cultural opportunities* over which an individual's participation could shift among many roles and span different levels of expertise – from creator to spectator, from critic to teacher, and so on. At the same time, researchers observed that some participants, such as community artists, also acted as facilitators, forging links between neighborhood-based art-making and other kinds of civic engagement, such as mural painting and community organizing.

In the San Francisco Bay area, ACIP collaborators have addressed participation, not only by reconsidering existing practices in documenting individual participation in programs (which were already quite thorough) but also by becoming more conscious of the relationships they rely on to do their work. Staff members from several arts-based youth development programs, for example, have created processes to document the various formal and informal collaborators that make their work possible. In doing so, they have pushed forward our understanding of a particular category of participant: supporter.

## SUMMARY

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Accepting an expanded notion of cultural participation has important implications for researchers, as well as for funders, practitioners, and policymakers in the arts and in community development. Recent national studies using a broad conception of participation confirm that people in the U.S. are more deeply and widely engaged in cultural and creative activities than previous research suggested. Furthermore, local researchers conducting qualitative and

quantitative work are finding that cultural participation takes place in multiple ways in many different types of communities. However, there is considerable variation across communities in the rates of involvement in cultural activities. Finally, documentary practices among organizations to track cultural participation in communities remain a challenge, though promising examples are emerging from local research.



## NOTES

1. Atlanta, Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Denver, Los Angeles, Oakland, Providence, and Washington, D.C.
2. 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.
3. Peters, Moni, and Joni Cherbo. 1998. "The Missing Sector: The Unincorporated Arts." *Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society* 26(2): 115-28.
4. Walker, Chris, and Stephanie Scott-Melnyk. 2002. *Reggae to Rachmaninoff: How and Why People Participate in Arts and Culture*. Washington, D.C.: The Urban Institute.
5. Kansas City is a good example because of its social and economic similarity to the United States as a whole.
6. McCarthy, Kevin F., Arthur Brooks, Julia Lowell, and Laura Zakaras. 2001. *The Performing Arts in a New Era*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND.
7. McCarthy, Kevin F., and Kimberley Jinnett. 2001. *A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND.
8. Wali, Alaka, and Rebecca Severson, Mario Longoni. 2000. *Adult Participation in the Informal Arts: Exploring an Unknown Realm*. Report to the National Endowment for the Arts. Chicago: Chicago Center for Arts Policy at Columbia College.
9. Stern, Mark J., and Susan C. Seifert. 1997. *Community Revitalization, Diversity, and the Arts in Philadelphia*. Working Paper from the Social Impacts of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania, School of Social Work. Philadelphia, Penn.
10. The research was also part of the Getty Research Institute's Participation Project: Artists, Communities and Cultural Citizenship, directed by Josephine Ramirez.



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