



The **James Irvine**  
Foundation

# Hearts and Minds: The Arts and Civic Engagement

A report for The James Irvine Foundation  
By Nick Rabkin

## Foreword

Does participation in the arts influence civic engagement?

This is an important question for all leaders, artists, and nonprofits who believe that arts experiences can lead to a better society — fostering deeper understanding and empathy among diverse populations, helping individuals gain the ability to adapt to change, and inspiring all to act in the interest of others.

The answer to this question is especially vital to the growing number of arts nonprofits experimenting with or fully embracing engagement as a pathway to sustained relevance. This group includes participants in Irvine's New California Arts Fund, a learning community of grantee-partners committed to arts engagement as the basis for organizational transformation.

To inform the efforts of these grantee-partners and others who share their interests, we asked Nick Rabkin, a leading thinker and researcher in the sector, to take a close look at links between arts and civic engagement. As Nick reports from his wide-ranging study, there is ample evidence of compelling connections. The headline is that people who participate in arts, especially those who go beyond traditional arts audience experiences, are more likely to be active in their communities and to be *making a difference in the lives of others*. His analysis yields essential knowledge regarding the personal and societal values rooted in experiences of arts and culture.

At Irvine, we are encouraged by Nick's distillation of research pointing to the positive effect of arts involvement on civic participation. All arts nonprofits, not only those in the New California Arts Fund, have natural advantages in helping people achieve new levels of understanding, empathy, and adaptation — critical capacities for acceptance and connection across class, race, heritage, or immigration status. Nick Rabkin's study shows that, for many, arts experiences fuel civic engagement, enabling people to apply these levers for greater good.

We hope that arts nonprofits and others absorb and own the implications of these findings, exploring ways to more effectively provide arts experiences that enrich our shared social and civic life.



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## Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Who is civically engaged? And why?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>The social effects of the arts</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Arts education research: A turn toward young people</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>18</b>

## Introduction

Art has always drawn people together. Humans have made useful objects with aesthetic features for as long as 50,000 years. They evoked the animals they hunted 40,000 years ago in large, sophisticated paintings in cave locations that were special sites where the whole community gathered. Renaissance artists made images that inspired belief and told vital religious stories. Scientists are now probing how the arts may have offered evolutionary advantages to early humans and how the arts help us find meaning in the world by developing capacities to see and create patterns, solve problems, and invent and understand symbols and metaphors. The arts have played powerful utilitarian roles for individuals and for the societies in which they live for millennia.

For the last 250 years, though, “art for art’s sake” — the notion that commercial, utilitarian, moral, or didactic functions are distractions from art’s ineffable, intrinsic value as an expression of the artists’ vision — has been a prevailing philosophy in the world of culture. Does that suggest that the social benefits of art have diminished and eroded? Do the arts still play powerful utilitarian roles?

This report is an inquiry into one utilitarian role: the relationship between the arts and what social scientists generally refer to as civic or community engagement. *The New York Times*, quoting Thomas Ehrlich, defined civic engagement as:

**“working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.”<sup>1</sup>**

Civic engagement generates the networks and norms of reciprocity and trust that are essential to effective and efficient societies. This social capital *bonds* groups of homogeneous people — often people who live close together, or, perhaps, share a race, gender, or religion — *and* it *bridges* across heterogeneous groups.

Alexis de Tocqueville famously wrote that Americans had a special genius for civic engagement, which was the foundation of our democracy and success.<sup>2</sup> But there has been growing concern about the resilience and sustainability of American community for at least four decades. In a highly influential study, Robert Putnam documented a precipitous decline in civic engagement that began about 1970. He put it starkly: “We were overtaken by a treacherous rip current. Without at first noticing, we have been pulled apart from one another and from our communities.”<sup>3</sup>

That rip current can have deadly consequences. An illustration: During the Chicago heat wave that killed 739 people in 1995, two adjacent, equally poor neighborhoods had very different outcomes. Little Village, a densely populated Latino neighborhood with robust community organizations, churches, public spaces, commercial activity, large extended families, and a relatively low crime rate, had a very low death rate. North Lawndale, an African American community, had no commercial district, tiny storefront churches, fewer public spaces, few extended families, and a high crime rate. Many of its residents lived alone and were afraid to leave their homes or open their windows. Its death rate was 10 times higher. Public health and safety breakdowns added to danger in North Lawndale, but those breakdowns affected Little Village as well. Its advantage was robust civic engagement.<sup>4</sup>

1 Ehrlich, *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, vi.

2 de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.

3 Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

4 Klinenberg, *Heat Wave: A social autopsy of disaster in Chicago*.

Building social capital in the context of deeply segregated cities like Chicago is particularly challenging. North Lawndale would not have dodged the terrible consequences of the heat wave if only there were more cultural resources in the neighborhood. But in this report, we will show it is a serious mistake to believe that the arts are frivolous indulgences, that their value is limited to aesthetics, or that art is only “for art’s sake.” Powerful evidence suggests the arts do “make a difference in the civic life of our communities” and support “developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference.”

A note for clarification: Over the decades of declining civic engagement, the proportion of adults attending traditional arts events (e.g., theatrical performances; classical, jazz, and dance concerts; art exhibits) has also been declining. Many nonprofit arts organizations have concluded they “will have a diminished future unless they find a way to solidly engage with their communities,”<sup>5</sup> and they have embraced strategies referred to as “community” or “audience engagement,” designed to redefine those relationships, sometimes with constituencies poorly represented in their audiences, and sometimes through more active and participatory programs. Those strategies are related to civic engagement: They are intended to develop wider social networks and deepen the impact of arts experiences. But arts or community engagement, as practiced by most arts organizations, is not the same as civic engagement as understood by social scientists. Our purpose here is to better understand whether research has shown that arts experiences of *any* kind — whether conventional audience experiences or newer “engagement” experiences, learning in the arts, or making art itself — affect civic engagement.

#### Key conclusions of this exploration:

- Correlations between arts participation and the motivations and practices of civic engagement are substantial and consistent.
- Art making experiences appear to encourage civic engagement more so than experiences as an audience member.
- Some arts experiences in some settings generate social capital directly.
- Arts experiences during adolescence are particularly influential.
- People who have built identities around civic engagement often credit arts experiences as significant to their development.

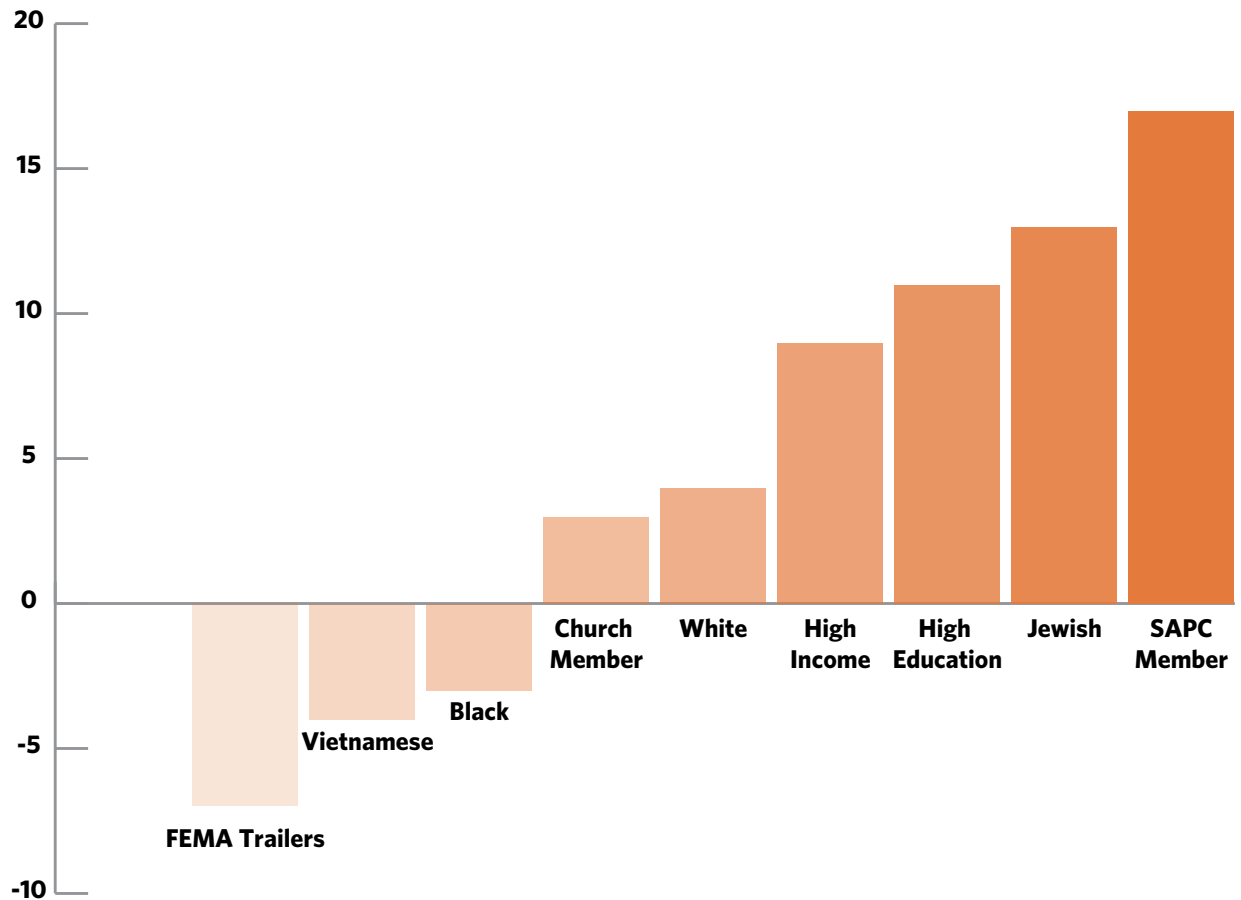
5 Tabachnick, “Engagement Is Busting Out All Over.” *The Clyde Fitch Report*.

## Who is civically engaged? And why?

In the decade after Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, journalists frequently observed that artists were vital to the city’s revival. That insight is confirmed by hard data. A survey of 7,000 New Orleans residents after Katrina showed, “By the standards of the civic engagement literature the members of the Social Aid and Pleasure Clubs who sponsor weekly parades [second-lines] are ‘model citizens,’ scoring highest of any group. They are community leaders, supporting one another in times of need and providing concrete services.” Members of the clubs are “mostly lower-income, and thus lack strong individual resources, [but] are nevertheless more civically active, service-oriented, and trusting than even the rich or well-educated,” who might be expected to be more civically engaged.<sup>6</sup>

### CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN SELECTED SOCIAL GROUPS

Showing percentage points above or below New Orleans average

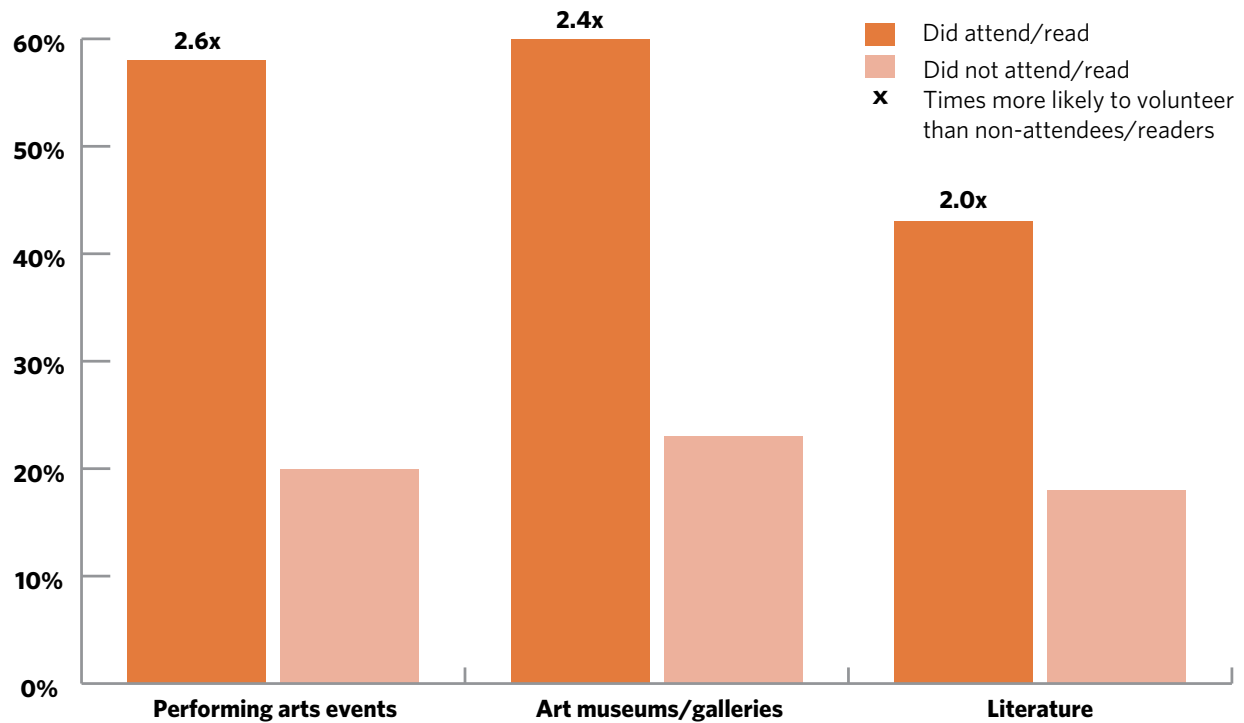


Source: LSU Disaster Recovery Survey. N = ca. 6,000. Data collection initiated in Spring of 2006, continuing through 2010. More details available at <http://community-wealth.org/sites/clone.community-wealth.org/files/downloads/paper-weil.pdf>.

6 Weil, *The New Orleans Index at Five: The rise of community engagement after Katrina*.

Is New Orleans an anomaly? The National Endowment for the Arts 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) suggests not. It shows that adults who attended museums or the performing arts were two and a half times more likely to volunteer in their communities than those who did not.<sup>7</sup> Analysis of data from the 2008 SPPA substantiates these results. Attendees were “far more likely than non-attendees to vote, volunteer, or take part in community events,” even after adjusting for demographic and educational factors.<sup>8</sup>

**PERCENTAGE OF U.S. ADULTS THAT VOLUNTEERED, BY WHETHER OR NOT THEY PARTICIPATED IN THE ARTS: 2008**



Source: National Endowment of the Arts 2002 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA).

These findings are also supported by analysis of data from the General Social Survey (GSS), a highly regarded source on American society. It found:

**“strong evidence that the arts enhance civil society; individuals who have both direct and indirect exposure to the arts are more engaged in civic activities within their communities, have higher levels of social tolerance... individuals who attend arts events at least once a year are more likely to participate in various civic associations, exhibit greater tolerance towards racial minorities and homosexuals, and behave in a manner which regards the interests of others above those of oneself.”<sup>9</sup>**

7 National Endowment for the Arts, *The Arts and Civic Engagement: Involved in Arts, Involved in Life*.  
 8 National Endowment for the Arts, *Art-Goers in Their Communities: Patterns of Civic and Social Engagement*.  
 9 Lereux and Bernádska, *Impact of the Arts on Individual Contributions to U.S. Civil Society*.



Similar results were reported from a study of the Canadian GSS, which also found that more frequent participation was positively associated with volunteerism.<sup>10</sup>

The correlations between arts participation and civic engagement are significant, but they reveal nothing about the motives and values that drive civic engagement. Is civic engagement an outcome of arts participation? Or is the relationship merely statistical and coincidental? These questions suggest other, underlying questions: What kinds of people are civically engaged? How did they become who they are?

*Common Fire: Lives of commitment in a complex world* is a classic study of 100 people who built their lives around “meaningful work for the common good.”<sup>11</sup> Among the fundamental qualities of highly engaged people are capacities to imagine a world that is different and better, communicate that vision to others, take on roles and responsibilities that involve personal risk, think critically and systemically, and empathize with those who are excluded or marginalized from society. *Common Fire* concludes, “The quality of a society is dependent on the strength of its imagination in the world,” suggesting a deep connection between the health of a society and the arts, a domain in which imagination is absolutely central.<sup>12</sup>

Some *Common Fire* subjects substantiated that connection. They volunteered that art had played significant roles in their lives — learning persistence from a childhood piano teacher, finding inspiration from music, or moral orientation from books or films they had seen as children. They spoke of encountering and empathizing with “the other” through the theater, visual art, or film. Some found their own early experiences in community by “sharing poetry, writing letters, creating music, [or] sharing a science or art project...”<sup>13</sup>

10 Jeanotte, “Singing Alone? The Contribution of Cultural Capital to Social Cohesion and Sustainable Communities.” *International Journal of Cultural Policy*.

11 Daloz et al., *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World*.

12 Ibid., 133.

13 Ibid., 43.



## The social effects of the arts

In 2004, the Canadian government assembled an international workshop of leading scholars, cultural practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to consider the social effects of participation in the arts. They quickly agreed they believed the arts enhance understanding and capacity for action, contribute to formation and retention of identity, modify values and preferences for collective choice, build social cohesion, contribute to community development, and foster civic participation. The web of causes and effects flowing from the arts are “how members of a society engage in citizenship.”<sup>14</sup> When asked for empirical support for their beliefs, though, the workshop found only “suggestive evidence.”<sup>15</sup> It nonetheless concluded that the weight of the evidence was substantial and reliable. “The fact that there is a great deal of it from many independent sources and perspectives lends credibility to evidence as a whole. We may not actually see the fire, but there is too much smoke to responsibly ignore.”<sup>16</sup> This suggests that the effects of the arts are likely to be cumulative over significant time and difficult to document: a slow drip rather than a sudden eruption, and easy to take for granted. Let’s look through the smoke for open flames.

### Survey insights

Several researchers have focused on community-based arts projects in which a product was created with the participation of community members, often working with professional artists. One study of nearly 90 such projects, primarily in Australia, found that participants believed they had increased social and human capital and built and developed communities. Most reported the experience had improved communication, organizing, and planning skills, as well as understanding of different cultures and lifestyles. The researchers concluded that “community-based, collaborative artistic production... is an extraordinary catalyst for generating social capital.”<sup>17</sup>

A highly influential European study focused on dozens of “participatory and voluntary arts projects,” most in the United Kingdom. Many, like a theater project with juvenile offenders, were in low-income or otherwise marginal communities, where civic engagement was not the norm. Participants reported social impact in five areas:

- **Personal development** — participants felt more confident about what they, or groups they were part of, could do.
- **Social cohesion** — even in places where “sociability has been almost extinguished by poverty, crime, and mistrust... participatory arts has made a difference.”
- **Community empowerment** — participation built community capacity, self-reliance, political and social insight, and cooperation.
- **Local image and identity** — many felt more positive about where they live, and a majority wanted to help local projects in the future.
- **Imagination and vision** — many discovered they could be creative; overcame risks associated with self, identity, ability, and relationships; and tried things they had not done before.<sup>18</sup>

14 Stanley, *Recondita Armonia — A Reflection on the Function of Culture in Building Citizenship Capacity*. 33.

15 *Ibid.*, 48.

16 *Ibid.*, 77.

17 Williams, *The Social Impact of Arts Programs: How the Arts Measure Up*.

18 Matarasso, *Use or Ornament? The Social Impact of Participation in the Arts*. Stroud, U.K.: Comedia.

Similar findings emerged in a recent study of an effort by a Minneapolis social service agency to advance community development by sponsoring 52 participatory projects led by 30 neighborhood-based artists on Chicago Avenue and other streets. The projects ranged from a stiling club to artistic bike racks to puppet shows to photographic portraits. People who lived on blocks on which projects occurred were nearly twice as likely to report that it was very important to be civically engaged in their neighborhood than those who lived on blocks that had no projects.<sup>19</sup>

## Ethnographic evidence

In-depth case studies of a dozen examples of the “informal” arts — quilting and drumming circles, church choirs, rappers, a painting class, a writing group, community theaters, and musical ensembles, often without professional artists — found that arts of these types are ubiquitous. In one low-income African American community with almost no nonprofit arts organizations, the study identified 78 church choirs, arts programs in the park, creative writing at the library, and spoken word and open mic events.

The informal arts groups had low entry barriers and an inclusive sociability that placed value primarily on making positive contributions to the group. The researchers found that informal arts practice fosters tolerance of difference, trust and consensus building, collaborative work habits, innovation and creativity to solve problems, the capacity to imagine change, and the willingness to work for it. The study moves beyond the statistical correlation of arts participation and civic engagement by finding, “The mechanism for developing these skills likely lies in the regular creation of art. For example, the need for constant practice/rehearsal, or other honing of skills in a voluntary setting leads to the development of techniques for giving and taking criticism as a way of knowledge sharing and collective improvement. In turn, this action requires people to listen to each other, creating momentary spaces of trust, and opening the way for collaboration.”<sup>20</sup>

Informal arts practice fosters tolerance of difference, trust and consensus building, collaborative work habits, innovation and creativity to solve problems, the capacity to imagine change, and the willingness to work for it.

In short, participation in the *making of art itself* in those informal settings makes it more likely that neighbors will help neighbors, build social skills and tolerance, see and move beyond normative social divisions, and appreciate and share gifts with people who may be quite unlike themselves. There was evidence of *both bonding and bridging capital* in the practice of many of the informal arts groups. A quilting circle in a low-income black neighborhood compared notes with a quilting circle in a wealthy white suburb, for example. Informal artists appear to *practice* the values and dispositions that lie behind civic engagement. In many respects people involved in the informal arts are civically engaged through arts practice itself. It is prudent to note that, once again, this study focused on *active participation* in the arts, not on audience experiences.

19 Nicodemus et al., *Adding it Up: An evaluation of Arts on Chicago & Arts Blocks*.

20 Wali et al., *Informal Arts: Finding Cohesion, Capacity, and Other Cultural Benefits in Unexpected Places*.

It is worth recalling, too, that the members of the social aid and pleasure clubs so instrumental in New Orleans, are not members of an audience either. They are artists and culture-makers themselves who bring neighbors together to make a civic performance. There is a consistent pattern in the research: *Making* art is likely to be more consequential than experiences as an audience member with regard to civic engagement. There is a simple logic behind that pattern: Making art engages people cognitively, emotionally, physically, and socially, and it requires planning, consideration of how others may interpret the work, and a meaningful investment of time. The audience experience simply demands less of people.

Making art is likely to be more consequential than experiences as an audience member with regard to civic engagement.

## Audience experiences

There is very limited research on the effects of audience experiences on civic engagement, and what is known falls considerably short of suggesting that these experiences may affect civic engagement significantly.

While social scientists have not established a connection, some artists, including Oskar Eustis, believe there is one. Recalling his production of *Angels in America* in Providence in 1996, Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater said,

**"I knew everybody in the audience. (It's a tiny place.) I'd be standing at the back of the theater, and I could point to the back of their heads and go, 'He's a homophobe, she's a homophobe.' And yet they were leaping to their feet at the end! No matter what people's ideology, they were spending seven hours identifying with openly, complexly gay figures. You can't spend seven hours identifying with someone without feeling close to them, without understanding their point of view. *Angels in America* at that moment was the major cultural artifact of a change that has gone faster in the last 25 years than I could possibly have imagined."**

Reflecting on *Hamilton*, a show Eustis helped develop at the Public Theater, he suggested a theory of how the audience experience changes people, even those who may "completely disagree with its ideology" about immigration and inclusion in American society: "Their hearts are taking them somewhere that their minds can't yet go, but their minds follow. That is how people change."<sup>21</sup> Eustis' theory is consistent with the findings of *Common Fire*, which found an emotional engagement "with 'the other'" was the foundation for subsequent cognitive understanding.

21 Remnick, "Awkward Dog Banter And The Marxist Who Brought Us Hamilton." *The New Yorker Radio Hour*.

## Arts education research: A turn toward young people

The report on the Canadian workshop, previously cited, took a close look at adolescence, the time in the developmental trajectory when adult identities are shaped. It reminds us that the arts are much at the center of adolescent life, quoting American sociologist Ann Swidler: “Young people are voracious cultural consumers because they are still trying out (and trying on) the possible selves they might become. They are in the process of forming and reforming strategies of action, developing the repertoire of cultured capacities out of which they will construct the patterns of their adult lives. They seek out the shaping, and the shaking up, culture can offer.”<sup>22</sup> The cultural experiences of adolescence are intense and generative. So it would stand to reason that they are likely to contribute to those who choose to become more engaged.

“Young people are voracious cultural consumers because they are still trying out (and trying on) the possible selves they might become.”

- Ann Swidler

Arts education is, of course, one of the most significant domains in which people participate in the arts, so on its face it is relevant to our inquiry. It is particularly important, though, because virtually all of the research on arts education concerns young people, and much of it is about adolescence.

The Department of Education’s NELS:88 database followed 25,000 middle and high school students for 10 years. Analysts divided the subjects into quartiles of higher and lower “arts participators” and found consistently better academic and developmental outcomes among high participators, including a proxy for youthful civic engagement, community service. The impact of arts participation was significant for all income groups, but more significant for low-income youth than for more privileged youth.<sup>23</sup>

The analysts took an in-depth look at outcomes for students who were primarily focused on theater, observing that theater is “an opportunity to put oneself into another’s shoes, loaded with potential opportunities to interact with students to whom one might not gravitate in the ordinary course of school life.” They found that 12th-grade students who are involved with theater were nearly 40 percent more likely to indicate that they were friends with students from other racial groups and 29 percent less likely to feel that it is okay to make a racist remark.<sup>24</sup>

Researchers returned to NELS:88 and analyzed three more large-scale databases to explore the effects of arts participation on youth as they move along from high school and into young adulthood.<sup>25</sup> The data showed that low-SES (socio-economic status) students who are high arts participators are more likely than low arts participators to do better across the entire curriculum, graduate from high school, go on to college, earn a bachelor’s degree, and hold a full-time job. *Common Fire* found that college was an important site for development of the values and dispositions that are the foundation of civic

22 Stanley, *Recondita Armonia — A Reflection on the Function of Culture in Building Citizenship Capacity*. 57.

23 Catterall et al., “Involvement in the Arts and Human Development — General Involvement and Intensive Involvement in Music and Theater Arts.” *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning*. 3.

24 *Ibid.*, 15, 16.

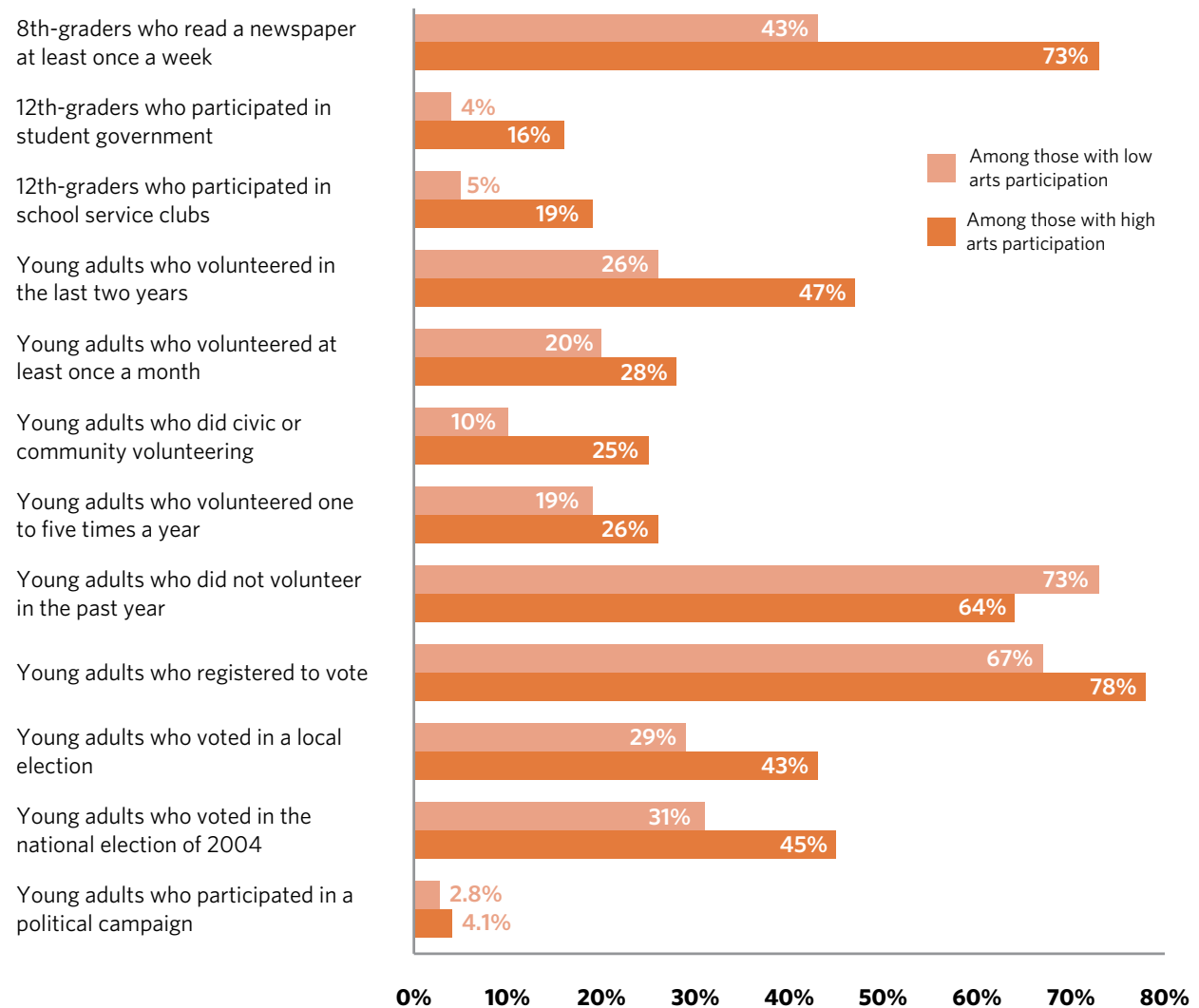
25 Catterall, *The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies*.

engagement, so the very fact that those students were more likely to attend and graduate from college is relevant to our inquiry.

The four databases also include considerable data about outcomes that we can reasonably consider to be indicators of civic engagement. The chart below summarizes differences between high and low arts participators and young adults on a dozen of those outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

The broad pattern is very clear. The high arts participators were more likely to have an inclination toward civic engagement across every one of the indicators.

**ACTIVITIES BY YOUTH WITH LOW SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS**



26 Catterall, *The Arts and Achievement in At-Risk Youth: Findings from Four Longitudinal Studies*, 1-21.

## Youth ethnography

A multi-site study of adolescents in out-of-school programs in low-income neighborhoods sheds significant light on how and why the arts may have such potent effects.<sup>27</sup> This study explored three kinds of programs — sports, community service, and arts — identified by young people themselves as high quality. The main focus of the research was careful participant observation of the activities and the conversations of the youth while participating in the programs. Their conversations were recorded, and transcriptions were coded to find patterns of linguistic development prompted by their activities. Youth in all three types of programs were doing better across a variety of academic and developmental measures than peers who did not participate in after-school programs. But the youth in the arts programs were doing better than those in sports or community service programs on virtually all counts, including linguistic developments that indicated growing capacities to plan, work with others, use their imaginations, solve complex problems, and reflect on their own learning and development.

To the researchers' surprise, a careful review showed that the youth in arts programs were comparatively disadvantaged — more likely to have a single parent; to have had trouble with the law, alcohol, or drugs; or to be on welfare than those in sports and community service programs. Three years of further research led them to conclude that the reason for the arts programs' greater power was that they offered the youth more complex roles and responsibilities than the sports and community service programs. They exercised their imaginations, and they strengthened their sense of agency, tolerance for ambiguity, inclination to collaborate, and ability to articulate their perspectives on their lives and the world around them. Youth consistently asked "what if?" questions, and they used modal verbs like "would" and "could" — linguistic indicators that they considered alternate scenarios and developed ability to plan and adapt to changing conditions.

These developmental outcomes are, of course, closely aligned with the values and dispositions *Common Fire* identified in its subjects. The chart on the following page summarizes the dispositions, values, and skills found developing among youth studied in out-of-school arts programs and those identified by *Common Fire*.

The youth in the arts programs were doing better than those in sports or community service programs on virtually all counts, including linguistic developments that indicated growing capacities to plan, work with others, use their imaginations, solve complex problems, and reflect on their own learning and development.

27 Heath, "Imaginative Actuality: Learning in the Arts During Nonschool Hours." *Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning*.

**DISPOSITIONS, VALUES, OR SKILLS CHARACTERISTIC OF BOTH COMMON FIRE AND OUT-OF-SCHOOL YOUTH ARTS**

- |  |                           |
|--|---------------------------|
| ✓ Empathy/compassion                   | ✓ Tolerance for ambiguity |
| ✓ Engagement with the other            | ✓ Planning and adaptivity |
| ✓ Identification with the marginalized | ✓ Persistence             |
| ✓ Multiple perspectives                | ✓ Risk-taking             |
| ✓ Critical, systemic thinking          | ✓ Use metaphor            |
| ✓ Imagination                          | ✓ Communicative           |

Here we see a clear indication that the youth arts programs built values, dispositions, and skills that are characteristic of engaged adults, and we see the mechanism of active art making among adolescents as the social, cognitive, emotional, and skill-based engine driving that development.

Recent studies of a gay youth theater ensemble,<sup>28</sup> a music program for incarcerated youth,<sup>29</sup> and programs for teens at four American contemporary art museums<sup>30</sup> came to very similar conclusions. The museum programs study found both bonding and bridging social capital, leading in some cases to careers in the arts and in youth development. Most reported that their experiences led them to place a high value on community and collaboration and on finding personal connections with people of other backgrounds. Some alumni of the programs, some of whom are now in their mid-30s, believe that the programs were decisive in their life trajectories.

28 Halverson, "Inside Out: Facilitating Gay Youth Identity Development through a Performance-based Youth Organization." *Identity: An International Journal of Theory and Research*. 67-90.

29 Wolf and Holochwost, *Our Voices Count: The Potential Impact of Strength-based Programs in a Juvenile Justice Setting*.

30 Munley, *Room to Rise: The lasting impact of intensive teen programs in art museums*.



## Conclusions

Does arts participation make civic engagement more likely and support development of bridging or bonding social capital? This report reviewed research that investigated whether attending arts events, making art, or learning about art is associated with efforts to make communities — in the most immediate sense or in the most global — better places to live.

Does the research show that the arts influence individuals in some way to become more inclined to be civically engaged? There is just a thimbleful of research on these questions in an ocean of social science, but everything in the thimble points to a significant relationship between arts participation and civic engagement. More research is clearly needed, but the existing evidence indicates:

**Correlations between arts participation and the motivations and practices of civic engagement are substantial and consistent.** There are statistical correlations between arts participation of any kind, and volunteerism and social tolerance — two important indicators of civic engagement — in large-scale, representative databases. These correlations are significant, but they are not evidence that arts participation is a cause of civic engagement.

**Art making experiences appear to encourage civic engagement more so than experiences as an audience member.** Multiple studies suggest that making art is likely to have more significant effects on civic engagement than attending arts events. The social science research on attending arts performances or exhibitions and civic engagement is thin and equivocal, but some artists deliberately seek to move audiences emotionally around civic issues, understanding that often people's feelings must change before their minds or behaviors are likely to change. Those kinds of arts experiences are not the same as civic engagement, but they are likely to open pathways of tolerance and interest in bridging divides between communities that make civic engagement possible and more likely.

**Some arts experiences in some settings generate social capital directly.** A deep study of art making outside the formal, professional arts found that this practice is itself a form of civic engagement that builds bonding capital within communities and often generates bridging capital across social boundaries.

**Arts experiences during adolescence are particularly influential.** Analysis of large-scale educational databases showed strong statistical evidence that young people who are "high arts participators" are more inclined toward community service, a reasonable proxy for civic engagement. This research supports the correlations between arts participation and civic engagement among adults. It also shows that the relationship is present during a period in young people's lives in which they are busy shaping their identities. A close look at theater students showed they were more likely to engage in pro-civic behaviors — suggesting that the experience may push them beyond values and dispositions and into action.

**People who have built their identities around civic engagement often credit arts experiences as significant to their development.** A significant number of people who have built their identities around civic engagement informed researchers that arts influenced their development. Others indicate that the arts were a source of inspiration that sustained their civic work. Investigations of the effects of "community-based" arts experiences and "participatory and voluntary arts projects" indicate that the participants gained confidence and important social skills and grew in their inclination to become more involved in community issues. A multi-site study of high-quality non-school arts programs for

low-income youth, and studies of programs for teens in contemporary art museums, a music program for incarcerated youth, and a theater program for gay youth showed that they cultivate values, skills, and dispositions — empathy and compassion, engagement with the other, identification with the marginalized, multiple perspectives, critical thinking, imagination, tolerance for ambiguity, planning and adaptivity, persistence, risk-taking, use of metaphor, communication — that are key to the identities of people who are deeply engaged in civic endeavors. This constitutes significant evidence that the vector of causality is likely to move from active arts participation to civic engagement, at least for young people who become intensively involved in arts programs, including some who may be expected to be otherwise inclined in anti-social directions.

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## About Nick Rabkin

Nick Rabkin is the principal at reMaking Culture. His consulting and research for the cultural sector and philanthropy focus on reimagining and expanding how the arts enrich communities, schools, and democracy by making them more relevant in more ways to more people — as art makers, consumers, learners, and citizens. He has directed a nonprofit theater, served as Chicago's Deputy Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, guided the MacArthur Foundation's arts grantmaking for a decade, and researched as well as written extensively about the value of arts education and its curricula. His consulting and research practice includes cultural planning, program planning, and evaluation and assessment.



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