



EXECUTIVE BRIEFING

CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT IN CALIFORNIA'S INLAND REGIONS

*With Implications for Cultural
Service Providers and Funders*

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Research Commissioned by The James Irvine Foundation

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FOREWORD

The James Irvine Foundation's Arts program exists to promote a vibrant and inclusive artistic and cultural environment in California. To pursue this goal in earnest, we must make every effort to understand the dynamics of cultural experience in the communities we serve.

Irvine engaged consultants at WolfBrown and the Alliance for California Traditional Arts to investigate patterns of cultural engagement in two rapidly growing and ethnically diverse regions of California, the San Joaquin Valley and the Inland Empire, which together account for nearly eight million people. In commissioning this research, the Foundation aims to develop a broader, more inclusive definition of cultural engagement; to take stock of patterns of engagement in the two regions; and to gain a sense of how it might support culture in these areas more equitably and more effectively.

This executive briefing of *Cultural Engagement in California's Inland Regions* is provided in the spirit of sharing knowledge with organizations that fund or deliver arts experiences to California's diverse communities. This briefing is not intended to be directive or prescriptive; rather, it offers findings and questions interested organizations can use to examine implications for their own work at the vital intersection of culture and community.



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ABOUT THE STUDY

Cultural Engagement in California's Inland Regions explores patterns of cultural engagement in the San Joaquin Valley and the Inland Empire. Two major data collection efforts were undertaken. The first was a door-to-door intercept survey of more than 1,000 randomly selected households in six distinctly different neighborhoods, three in the Fresno area and three in Riverside and San Bernardino. The second was a self-administered survey of more than 5,000 residents of the two regions, promoted as the “California Cultural Census” and conducted online and through intercept work at various locations and events. It is important to note that this second data set aggregates multiple samples, including respondents who were selected at the convenience of outreach organizations. Although weighted to reduce potential biases, these data are not representative of all adults in the two regions.

Results paint a detailed picture of the breadth and depth of cultural engagement in the two regions and reveal a range of activity in music, theater and drama, reading and writing, dance, and visual arts and crafts — much of which occurs “off the radar” of the traditional infrastructure of nonprofit arts organizations and facilities. The study identifies specific types of activities which, if supported at higher levels, might equitably raise participation levels and achieve higher levels of cultural vitality in millions of homes and hundreds of communities. It concludes that cultural providers and funders should look deeper into the fabric of their communities for new partners, new settings and innovative approaches to drawing residents into cultural experiences.

This briefing provides a high level summary of the study's key findings, as well as discussion questions for cultural providers and funders. Comprehensive results are available at www.irvine.org, including an executive summary and detailed results by artistic discipline.

Acknowledgements

The execution of this study was a collaborative partnership between WolfBrown and the Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA), which played the central logistical role in managing local data collection efforts. The study benefited significantly from the conceptual guidance of Amy Kitchener, Jerry Yoshitomi and Josephine Ramirez, who served as advisors to the research team in matters of research design, and to The James Irvine Foundation in assisting with interpretation of the results and consideration of the implications. Michael Nau, a Ph.D. candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of California, Riverside, provided assistance in analyzing the qualitative data resulting from open-ended questions. Acknowledgements are also due to the thousands of California residents who took the time to complete a lengthy survey about their arts and cultural activities. In doing so, they have opened an important new window into the vibrant cultural life of California.



The California Cultural Census enriched this study with the insights of more than 5,000 residents within the state's inland regions.

MODES AND VECTORS OF ENGAGEMENT

This section contains definitions helpful to understanding this study's findings and the accompanying discussion questions. Research was grounded in a simple framework in which cultural literacy is the foundation of a healthy cultural ecology and supports higher levels of engagement, such as participatory cultural practice and consumption of professional cultural goods and services.¹ The study also made use of two conceptual frameworks for engagement: The five modes and six vectors of engagement aggregate individual variables, exposing patterns of engagement that might otherwise go unnoticed and raising the profile of certain types of activity.

Modes of Engagement²

Arts activities are grouped by level of creative control exercised by the participant.

1. *Inventive Participation engages the mind, body and spirit in an act of artistic creation that is unique and idiosyncratic, regardless of skill level (e.g., composing music, writing original poetry, painting).*
2. *Interpretive Participation is a creative act of self-expression that brings alive and adds value to pre-existing works of art, either individually or collaboratively, or engages one in arts learning (e.g., playing in a band, learning to dance).*
3. *Curatorial Participation is the creative act of purposefully selecting, organizing and collecting art to the satisfaction of one's own artistic sensibility (e.g., collecting art, downloading music and burning CDs).*
4. *Observational Participation encompasses arts experiences that the participant selects or consents to have, which involve viewing or watching art created or performed by others (e.g., attending live performances, visiting art museums).*
5. *Ambient Participation (not investigated in this study) includes encounters with art that the participant does not select (e.g., seeing architecture, hearing music in an elevator).*

Vectors of Engagement

Cross-cutting the modes of engagement are vectors of engagement defined in terms of setting and social or cultural context.

1. *Family-Based Engagement provides a measure of arts activity occurring in a family social context.*
2. *Faith-Based Engagement provides a measure of arts activity that occurs on the context of faith or in a place of worship.*
3. *Heritage-Based Engagement provides a measure of arts activity that serves to celebrate or sustain a cultural heritage or ethnic identity.*
4. *Engagement in Arts Learning captures the level at which a respondent is actively acquiring skills, either formally or informally.*
5. *Engagement at Arts Venues serves as an aggregate measure of use of purpose-built arts venues for activities in all disciplines.*
6. *Engagement at Community Venues serves as an aggregate measure of use of parks and outdoor settings, restaurants, bars and coffee shops, and community centers as venues for activities in each discipline. Vectors 5 and 6 permit comparison of users of conventional versus unconventional venues for arts activities.*

¹ Creative Community Index: Measuring Progress Toward a Vibrant Silicon Valley, John Kreidler and Philip J. Trounstine, Cultural Initiatives Silicon Valley, 2005, Page 6-7. Download available from <http://www.ci-sv.org/pdf/Index-2005.pdf>. Kreidler and Trounstine define cultural literacy as "...fluency in traditions, aesthetics, manners, customs, language and the arts, and the ability to apply critical thinking and creativity to these elements." (Page 6)

² The modes of engagement were informed by a construct called the Five Modes of Arts Participation found in The Values Study, 2004, commissioned by the Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism and conducted by Alan S. Brown & Associates.

KEY FINDINGS

A broad, inclusive definition is important to understanding total cultural engagement. Using a narrow definition of cultural engagement — such as attendance at conventional arts programs in conventional facilities — leaves out significant participation in non-conventional activities (such as quilting) and locations (such as parks) by communities large and small, including African Americans, the Hmong and Mexican farm workers.

Personal participation levels are high. The study indicates high levels of participatory cultural practice in the two regions consistent with the surge in personal creative expression documented in other studies. Just over half of all respondents reported that they regularly “take photographs” while half as many reported that they “paint, draw or make other art.” Four in ten respondents, on average, sing or play a musical instrument either currently or formerly. Social dancing is the most common form of dance participation addressed in the study, reported by 33 percent of all respondents.

Much cultural engagement occurs in non-arts spaces. The home far exceeds theaters, museums and galleries as the most common setting for engaging in cultural activities including music, dance, visual arts and crafts. Places of worship and other community venues such as parks play a prominent role in the cultural life of the regions studied, especially among African Americans and Hispanics.

Heritage-based and socially based forms of cultural engagement attract racially diverse participants. Many cultural activities are deeply embedded in religious, political and social contexts that vary from community to community. Six in 10 Hispanics and African Americans reported that they “practice cultural traditions in music, dance, storytelling, craft-making or prepare foods that represent your heritage,” compared to a third of Whites. Similarly, Hispanics are significantly more likely to engage in socially based forms of dance, compared to Whites.

The emergence of “curatorial” arts activities is changing the landscape of cultural engagement. Many young people and an increasing number of adults are selecting, organizing and editing the art in their lives. At present, downloading music is the third most common form of music participation after listening to music on the radio and attending concerts. For those ages 18 to 24, downloading music is more common than attending live concerts. Demand is likely to increase for activities that maximize the curatorial arts experience by helping people reach higher levels of technical capacity and aesthetic judgment.

Significant interest in arts learning activities goes unmet. A third of adult respondents indicated that they would like to take dance lessons. Many others reported that they would like to get more involved with photography or take music lessons.

Role models are key players in the cultural ecosystem. The study defines a cultural role model as “a person, either living or dead, who inspired you or helped you to express yourself creatively.” Respondents who could identify one or more cultural role models were much more likely to engage in participatory cultural activities and to attend live arts programs than those who could not.

Certain types of programming may increase broad-based cultural vitality. If supported at higher levels, strategic programs and activities may lead to increased cultural vitality across cultural groups in the Inland Empire and San Joaquin Valley. Specific program ideas and components are provided in the box below.

Opportunities to Increase Cultural Vitality

If well supported, these programming approaches may lead to significant gains.

- *Help to identify and stimulate use of community venues – such as public schools, parks and other outdoor settings, retail establishments and churches – as programmable arts spaces*
- *Promote transmission of cultural traditions, customs and values, including ethnic-specific spaces and programs*
- *Identify and support cultural role models in communities as a means of building capacity to transmit cultural practices and values*
- *Communicate in multiple languages to help a diversity of people find instructors and other resources for a wide range of participatory activities*
- *Help adults and children chronicle their lives and tell their stories*
- *Encourage and facilitate self-guided arts activities at home*
- *Provide low-cost musical instruments, especially guitars, drums and keyboards, as well as low-cost instruction*

QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

The study has implications for those who support arts and culture as service providers or as funders — especially those with a mandate to distribute resources equitably across geographic and cultural boundaries. This study provides an opportunity to reflect on programming strategies in order to respond to the challenging environment in which these organizations do business and, thereby, remain vital and relevant in their communities. This study does not suggest that organizations should operate outside of their missions in order to serve a more diverse community. For this reason, study implications are framed as questions intended to stimulate dialogue.

Questions for Service Providers

Connecting to the cultural ecology. Do your programs address cultural literacy, participatory cultural practice, or consumption of professional cultural products? If you operate at one of these levels, how might you support activity at the other levels in order to strengthen the overall system? What other cultural programs and providers should you nurture and support because they help to build a constituency for your programs?

Offering a variety of ways to engage. Do you offer inventive, interpretive, curatorial or observational programs? Do you provide family-based or heritage-based engagement opportunities? What are the needs within your community for these different types of engagement? What does your mission say about the types of programs you can offer? How can your programs evolve to respond to the desire for personal creative expression?

Delivering and packaging the program. If you accept that different segments of the public prefer to engage with culture in different ways, in different languages, at different times, at different places, with different social expectations, how might you re-format or repackage your programs to appeal to a broader and more diverse cross-section of the public? What might you do to further differentiate your programs, or to develop “product lines” geared to distinct audiences?

Selecting the location. How do your choices about venue and setting affect your likelihood of attracting different constituencies? What other community venues and settings might you use to reach a more diverse public? How might you engage your constituents in their homes? How can you leverage the content delivery systems in people’s homes (e.g., the radio, the CD player) to achieve a larger scale of impact among constituents that you do not currently serve? How can people without financial resources or mobility engage with your organization?

Motivating cultural role models. What can your organization do to encourage and reward your constituents for introducing and involving their friends and family in creative and cultural activities? What efforts might be undertaken at the community level to identify, support and recognize cultural role models?

Partnering for greater reach. With what other organizations (e.g., businesses, social service agencies, academic programs) might you partner to reach a broader cross-section of the public?

Representing the broad community. What board and staff leadership do you need to be able to effectively program for diverse cultural communities? How can you tap into existing leadership networks within your community?

Questions for Funders

Supporting a variety of ways to engage. What priorities are implicit or explicit in your funding programs? For example, do you value observational engagement over inventive engagement? Would an expanded view of the cultural system enable your organization to move beyond supporting delivery mechanisms to serving as an architect of impact?

Expanding the applicant pool. What kinds of programs and impacts are you supporting with your funding programs and application procedures? How can you place new emphasis on funding criteria other than artistic excellence, such as scale of impact and sustaining heritage? What does “excellence” mean in a community context?

Ensuring adequate infrastructure. Is it necessary to support infrastructure for cultural literacy and participatory cultural practice, or should it be left to develop on its own? How could you invest in this infrastructure? How might you involve for-profit, faith-based and other non-traditional partners? Which aspects of infrastructure are best created at the statewide or regional levels? How can heritage-based activities be supported without disrupting the social, political and religious contexts in which they occur?

Championing broad cultural vitality. The current power structure and financing of the cultural system tends to favor established nonprofits with professional staff and influential boards. In the communities you serve, who is the champion for the larger cultural vitality agenda that embraces a multiplicity of forms of engagement? Whose job is it to advance the cultural vitality agenda? With what resources?

Choosing where to invest. An inventory and assessment of cultural spaces at the community level could lead to more effective use of existing facilities and settings by cultural providers who seek to broaden their impact. Where are cultural experiences happening in your community? What spaces are available in your community?

Developing curatorial engagement. Increasingly, arts are experienced through “curatorial” engagement (e.g., downloading music, editing and organizing digital photos online), although few programs exist to help people reach higher levels of aesthetic judgment and quality in these activities. How can you be part of a response to this important development in cultural participation?

Building capacity. Funders may need to invest in cultural planning and the development of infrastructure and leadership prior to releasing funds into some communities. How can you upgrade the capacity of cultural providers to do the sort of planning they need to support broad and evolving forms of cultural engagement? Filling gaps in the cultural system may also require entirely new partnerships with communities and their social, governmental, academic and religious institutions. How will you support these new, highly localized partnerships?

Being responsive and flexible. In what ways could greater risk-taking, creativity and flexibility enable your program to respond most effectively to unusual opportunities and the unique needs of different communities relative to arts and culture?

The Full Research Report

For detailed results of *Cultural Engagement in California's Inland Regions*, go to www.irvine.org. Providers and funders are encouraged to start by reading a 20-page summary. Then, they can go to Chapter 4 of the full report to delve into detailed results pertaining to dance, music, theater, literary arts, visual arts, etc. – depending on their particular areas of interest.

Those responsible for this study hope that its results inform a rich dialogue – and advance research and sharing – about how best to support arts and culture in the context of diverse and ever-changing communities.



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