

2014 National Cultural Districts Exchange

STATE CULTURAL DISTRICTS: POLICIES, METRICS, AND EVALUATION

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Americans for the Arts has commissioned five essays spanning the intricacies of arts, entertainment, and cultural districts specifically for policymakers, arts leaders, planning professionals, community development practitioners, and others who are interested in developing new districts or adapting existing ones.

- > Creating Capacity: Strategic Approaches to Managing Arts, Culture, and Entertainment Districts
- > Cultural Districts: Bottom-Up and Top-Down Drivers
- > Cultural Tourism: Attracting Visitors and Their Spending
- > Art and Culture Districts: Financing, Funding, and Sustaining Them
- > **State Cultural Districts: Metrics, Policies, and Evaluation**

These essays and reports are part of our National Cultural Districts Exchange, where you can find more information on cultural district legislation, case studies, a national district survey, and a collection of webinars.

www.AmericansForTheArts.org/CulturalDistricts.



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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) is the membership organization that unites, represents, and serves the nation's state and jurisdictional arts agencies. Each of the 56 states and jurisdictions¹ has created an agency to support excellence in and access to the arts.

NASAA's research services help state arts agencies transfer ideas and understand data associated with administrative practices. These services allow for greater public understanding of the important work undertaken by state arts agencies and their role in supporting the arts, culture, heritage, and creativity in every state and jurisdiction. For many years, state arts agencies have articulated the public value of the arts in terms of economic, educational, and civic benefits and have initiated programs aimed at enhancing economic and community well-being through the arts.

Highlighting the economic benefits of the arts is a necessity for a majority of public arts agencies. State arts agencies have excelled at both implementing practices aimed at facilitating commerce through the arts and using research to better understand the contributions of arts and culture to the economy. These practices have been "mission critical" for many agencies, especially for agencies placed² within economic development departments in state government. There are currently eight state arts agencies placed within economic development departments and five within tourism or cultural tourism.

State arts agency practices toward fostering the creative economy have evolved over the years and increasingly, state arts agencies are pursuing cultural district policies. State cultural districts are special areas designated or certified by state governments that utilize existing concentrations of cultural resources to further encourage local economic and community development.

¹ "State Arts Agency Directory"; <http://www.nasaa-arts.org/About/State-Arts-Agency-Directory/index.php>

² "State Arts Agency Structure"; <http://www.nasaa-arts.org/Research/Structure/index.php>

NASAA has produced a series of research reports on state arts agency cultural districts policies and practices.³ This work has surfaced a number of key issues, some of which are critical not only to state arts agencies, but to those involved with cultural districts on the local and federal levels.

One such issue is developing metrics to evaluate cultural district program outcomes. In making the case for districts, advocates and practitioners at all levels are asked to provide quantitative economic data describing the benefits of cultural district policies. With the recent rise in the number of cultural districts across the country, more evaluations have surfaced and numerous data collection practices can be examined.

This essay will build on NASAA's prior work and further explore existing data collection practices, potential metrics, data challenges, and how these efforts fit within the need for all public arts agencies to describe both creative economy and placemaking outcomes.

³ "Creative Economic Development", <http://www.nasaa-arts.org/Research/Key-Topics/Creative-Economic-Development/index.php>

STATE ARTS AGENCY CULTURAL DISTRICT POLICIES

As documented in NASAA's State Cultural Districts Policy Brief,⁴ state arts agency cultural district policies have proliferated broadly across the nation. Statewide cultural district programs are now established in 14 states and more states are considering implementation of such policies. There are more than 200 state designated cultural districts, and new districts are emerging every year.

Some of the newer programs have experimented with different structures, and some of the older programs have reached a second or third stage of evolution. Moreover, several states do not run formal programs, but state legislation exists to allow for the creation of cultural districts at the municipal level. Self-certification of local districts is touched on in NASAA's policy brief, however, cultural district designation at the local level is considered a separate issue from formalized state programs and designation.

Another important distinction to make in understanding cultural district policies is the difference between cultural districts and cultural tax districts.

- **State cultural districts** encourage arts-based economic development and community revitalization in multiple areas across a state. These districts may provide state incentives, financial or otherwise, to encourage further cultural, community, and economic development.
- **Cultural tax districts** establish local tax authorities to leverage investment in arts and culture. Similar to local transit authorities, these districts generate revenues through special county or municipal taxes (often sales or property taxes) that allow the authority to fund cultural organizations within the district.

⁴ NASAA, "Cultural District Policy Brief" <http://www.nasaa-arts.org/Research/Key-Topics/Creative-Economic-Development/StateCulturalDistrictsPolicyBrief.pdf>

TABLE 1: STATES WITH FORMALIZED CULTURAL DISTRICT POLICIES

| STATE | PROGRAM NAME | ESTABLISHED | STATE AUTHORITY |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Arkansas | Arts and Cultural Districts | 2011 | Arkansas Arts Council |
| Colorado | Creative Districts | 2011 | Creative Industries Division within the Colorado Office of Economic Development |
| Indiana | Arts and Cultural Districts | 2008 | Indiana Arts Commission |
| Iowa | Cultural and Entertainment Districts | 2005 | Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs |
| Kentucky | Cultural Districts | 2011 | Kentucky Arts Council |
| Louisiana | Cultural Districts | 2007 | Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism |
| Maryland | Arts and Entertainment Districts | 2001 | Department of Business and Economic Development: Program Administration, Maryland State Arts Council |
| Massachusetts | Cultural Districts | 2010 | Massachusetts Cultural Council |
| New Mexico | Arts and Cultural Districts | 2007 | New Mexico Economic Development Department: New Mexico Main Street, Program Administration; New Mexico Arts, District Authorization |
| Oklahoma | Oklahoma Cultural District Initiative | 2013 | Oklahoma Arts Council |
| Rhode Island* | Tax-Free Arts Districts | 1998 | Rhode Island State Council on the Arts |
| South Carolina | Statewide Cultural Districts | 2014 | South Carolina Arts Commission |
| Texas | Cultural Districts | 2005 | Texas Commission on the Arts |
| West Virginia | Certified Arts Community | 2005 | West Virginia Commission on the Arts |

**Rhode Island passed legislation in 2013 which extended the tax benefits of Tax-Free Arts Districts to the entire state*

Source: State agency websites and cultural district enabling legislation

Table one illustrates the history cultural district policies as established by state legislatures or by executive initiative, as was the case in Kentucky. State cultural district initiatives started as far back as 1998, however, many of these programs are relatively recent, especially when taken in context with the more-than-50-year history of most state arts agencies.

TRENDS

Looking at the evolution of state cultural district policies over the years, a few trends emerge:

- A cautious approach to the pursuit of state tax incentives
- An emphasis on technical assistance for certified districts
- An increased focus on evaluation

Tax Incentives Trends

Of the six states that have most recently established cultural districts (from 2008 to 2014) none have introduced state-level tax incentives associated with these districts. This trend may be influenced by an unwillingness among state governments to relinquish revenues when budgets are tight. District managers see the value in having tax incentives, however the administrative complexities of tax incentives are acknowledged, and many states operate effective programs without tax incentives. States with tax incentives attached to cultural districts have tended to release public reports on such districts' economic and fiscal impact or other indicators. These reports help to illustrate the economic value of the state investment in cultural district tax incentives.

Technical Assistance Trends

Technical assistance is a primary function of state arts agency cultural district policies. State arts agencies offer many types of technical assistance in support of cultural districts. The technical assistance available depends on agency resources as well as the needs of cultural districts and their communities. While technical assistance options vary widely, opportunities tend to fall under (but are not limited to) one or more of the following categories:

- access to knowledge
- consulting
- networking
- leadership and governance
- program design and planning

- marketing
- evaluation
- fund raising
- guidance to noncertified communities.

Evaluation Trends

Quantitative and anecdotal evidence showing the benefits of cultural districts and community based arts initiatives continues to mount. While this trend is positive, a limited number of evaluations have been completed. As evaluative evidence for cultural districts increases and state budget conditions improve, the environment for adding tax benefits and for enabling more districts across more states becomes a greater possibility.

Cultural District Evaluation and Creative Placemaking

Cultural districts are also highly relevant to the concept of creative placemaking: the idea that arts and culture can play a central role in shaping the social and physical character of a neighborhood. In the creative placemaking schema,⁵ multiple players from the public, private, and nonprofit sectors act cooperatively to create positive social and economic outcomes.

State cultural district policies offer state assistance (in multiple forms) to pursue these positive outcomes in conjunction with—and at the will of—local communities and stakeholders. State cultural district policies offer a mechanism for communities to further develop and market their cultural assets if they so choose. Within this framework, states are more likely to certify and assist “naturally occurring” creative districts.⁶

States can offer a strategic helping hand to communities that are interested in integrating the arts into their economic development strategies. By allowing for statewide collaboration and learning, leveraging investments from other sources, and actively managing programs, state agencies can positively influence outcomes and collect the necessary information to articulate benefits

5 Ann Markusen and Anne Gadwa, “Creative Placemaking,” NEA 2010 <http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/CreativePlacemaking-Paper.pdf>

6 Mark Stern and Susan Seifert, “‘Natural’ Cultural Districts: A Three-City Study,” University of Pennsylvania, Social Impact of the Arts Project, LINC February 2013 http://impact.sp2.upenn.edu/siap/docs/natural_cultural_districts/Summary.15apr13.pdf

CULTURAL DISTRICT METRICS AND INDICATORS AT THE STATE AND LOCAL LEVEL

Nearly every statewide cultural district program has a data collection and reporting component. However, evaluations of those metrics have been less prevalent and varied in their approaches. In some cases, states commission research to analyze data sources within cultural districts to determine fiscal and economic impact. Examples of this type of research come from Maryland, through economic and fiscal impact analysis, and Iowa, through the economic impact analysis of historic preservation tax credits. In other cases, states are reporting descriptive statistics by aggregating required data as submitted by local districts. These types of reports, such as public value reports in Louisiana and Kentucky, provide straightforward descriptive statistics of business growth and vacancy rates.

Regardless of how a state might define the success of cultural districts, collection of at least some data is the norm. Mandating data collection can help with statewide evaluations; however, mandated data collection does not preclude local districts from collecting information specific to the mission and priorities of their districts. Data collection can also be collaboratively determined based on state and local priorities.

Overview of State Arts Agency Cultural District Metrics

Through an interview process and by collecting reporting materials from relevant programs, NASAA has catalogued the metrics used to report on the progress in eight cultural district programs. The metrics show a wide variety of tactics employed by states to assess cultural district impacts.



Highlandtown Arts and Entertainment District.
Photo by Pamela Dunne

Colorado Creative Industries

Colorado Creative Industries (CCI) requires annual reports from designated cultural districts which include mandatory reporting of the number of jobs created and occupancy rates within the district. Creative districts can report additional data depending on local priorities and may include visitors, sales taxes, or property values. Final reports also require data to fulfill necessary federal reporting requirements, budgetary data, and a narrative of accomplishments. Data collection and reporting methodologies are created early on with the goal of tracking data on an annual basis. CCI has also collected data using the WESTAF Creative Vitality Index which reports data on creative occupational employment, revenues of arts nonprofits, and sales for certain creative businesses. Additional data points are anecdotes of creative practices and collaborations undertaken by individual districts, the relocation of artists to districts, and how application data change over time.

Indiana Arts Commission

The Indiana Arts Commission's Statewide Cultural District Program collects annual reports for cultural districts on similar figures to what are collected in grantee final reports. These include the number of arts education activities, demographics of beneficiaries, program accomplishments, budget figures, and operational data. In addition, the Indiana Arts Commission is pursuing strategic evaluation methods in collaboration with partners to determine data points to better understand the economic dimensions of cultural districts. All local districts in Indiana collect data relevant to local goals, and the agency is pursuing some standardization of this collection to be used for statewide reporting. To do this, data on job creation, unemployment rates, vacancy rates, and other economic development outcomes are seen as future possibilities.

Kentucky Arts Council

In Kentucky, annual public value reports help the agency determine progress made by cultural districts. For these reports, an evaluation team helps cultural districts assess program impact. Districts are asked to describe accomplishments such as the number of capital projects, the number of partnerships achieved, and perceived benefits attributable to certification of districts such as events and business activities. Districts are also asked to report commercial and residential vacancies compared to prior years, property enhancements, local incentives, and efforts aimed at marketing and tourism.

Louisiana Division of the Arts

Louisiana collects annual reports from local governing authorities with data on economic and cultural activities within the districts. These reports help establish the return on investment received from tax incentives available to Louisiana Cultural Districts. Enabling cultural district legislation in Louisiana mandates that biennial reports be made to the state legislature. Reports include information on cultural district accomplishments, the number of businesses and individuals taking advantage of the sales tax exemption, the number of renovation projects, building vacancies, sales tax revenues and historic preservation tax credit data. The large number of state certified cultural districts in Louisiana (at least 67 as of 2014) and the data collected across the state has allowed for the state to report a number of impressive redevelopment accomplishments for the program such as decreased vacancy rates and large numbers of new businesses. While a formal evaluation of the economic or fis-



Cumberland, MD Arts and Entertainment District Heritage Festival. Photo by Pamela Dunne

cal impact of the program is in the works, the current reports provide a straightforward look at positive change occurring in communities across the state.

Maryland State Arts Council

In Maryland, evaluation of Arts & Entertainment Districts is mandated by the enabling legislation. The Maryland State Council on the Arts engages in both the collection of district data through annual reports and fiscal and economic impact studies. Maryland collects multiple data points through annual reports such as the list of district partnerships, district accomplishments, business changes, events and festivals, cultural and creative business assets, numbers of artists relocating to the district, and number of businesses taking advantage of the tax credits. With these data and others from the department of revenue, the Maryland State Arts Council partners with the Regional Economic Studies Institute at Towson University to create an annual impact analysis.⁷ The impact analysis uses the IMPLAN input/output model to describe the economic contribution of Maryland Arts & Entertainment Districts. The analysis provides data on the number of jobs induced, their contribution to Maryland's gross domestic product, and return on investment for tax credits.

Massachusetts Cultural Council

The Massachusetts Cultural District Initiative, a program of the Massachusetts Cultural Council, requires that individual districts collect information on two specific indicators: visitation numbers and occupancy rates. These indicators allow for the cultural council to measure specific outcomes related to tourism and redevelopment and minimize the reporting burden on local districts. Local districts are encouraged to collect additional data to suit their missions and initiatives.

New Mexico Arts Commission

New Mexico's Art and Cultural Districts legislation allows for a collaborative effort between the New Mexico Arts Commission and New Mexico Main Streets. The enabling legislation also calls for the creation of annual reports, however, it does not specify the types of data to be collected. In New Mexico, the program coordinator has implemented a survey mechanism to collect data for local districts. The survey asks districts to report data on the number of new artists, galleries, studio spaces, live/work spaces, events, as well as information on historic property rehabilitations.

⁷ Darius Irani and Jessica Grimm, "Maryland Arts and Entertainment Districts Impact Analysis FY 2013" Regional Economic Studies Institute, Towson University, February 2014 [http://www.msac.org/sites/default/files/files/Maryland%20Arts%20and%20Entertainment%20Districts%20Impact%20Analysis\(1\).pdf](http://www.msac.org/sites/default/files/files/Maryland%20Arts%20and%20Entertainment%20Districts%20Impact%20Analysis(1).pdf)



**Blue Star Museum/
Brewery in San Antonio**

Texas Commission on the Arts

The Texas Commission on the Arts conducted a study⁸ in 2010 which looked at the make-up of cultural districts in Texas, collected some baseline data and suggested a series of indicators to monitor in each district over time. The study looked at data collection challenges, a variety of data sources and indicators, and the potential relevance for measuring statewide accomplishments of the Cultural Districts program. Suggested indicators included figures on population, employment, property taxes, sales taxes, and the annual budgets of local districts.

⁸ "Texas Cultural District Program: Indicators for Measuring Success" TXP, Inc. 2010 http://txcultural-trust.org/wp-content/uploads/CulturalDistrict_12202010.pdf

TABLE 2: STATE ARTS AGENCY CULTURAL DISTRICT METRICS

| SAMPLING OF STATE ARTS AGENCY CULTURAL DISTRICT METRICS | STATES USING THESE METRICS |
|---|----------------------------|
| Capital project data such as property enhancements, new constructions and rehabilitations | MD, NM, LA, KY |
| Change in the number of businesses (creative or other) | MD, LA |
| Occupancy rates and changes (commercial, residential, other) | MA, CO, LA, KY |
| Demographics of district beneficiaries | IN |
| District budgets (revenues and outlays from multiple sources) | CO, TX |
| District employment data (arts related or otherwise) | CO |
| District staffing or other operational data | IN |
| Local development incentives available (and changes in these incentives) | KY |
| Narrative of district accomplishments | MD, IN, KY |
| Nonprofit arts organization revenue data | IN, CO |
| Number of artists relocating to a district | MD |
| Number of artists | NM |
| Number of arts education activities | IN |
| Number of beneficiaries for district program activities | MA |
| Number of businesses and individuals taking advantage of tax incentives | MD, LA |
| Number of events and festivals | MD, KY |
| Number of jobs created (arts related or other) | CO |
| Number of partnerships achieved at the local level | MD, KY |
| Number of studio spaces and live/work spaces | NM |
| Number of visitors | MA, CO |
| Population data | TX |
| Property values (commercial, residential, other) | CO |
| Sales tax revenues (total or from a selected business type) | CO, LA |
| Value of historic preservation tax credits | NM, MD, LA |
| Value of other tax incentives such as admissions taxes | MD |

The tabulation of indicators by state reveals a large variety of metrics and no single observed metric utilized by a majority of states. The above list is not exhaustive, however, the variety suggests that approaches are highly localized/specialized.

Factors Influencing State Cultural District Data Collection in Practice

With this inventory, we can infer that state level cultural district reporting metrics are influenced by a number of factors:

- **Policy outcome goals.** For example, legislation may indicate specific economic development goals such as property redevelopment and decreased vacancy rates.
- **Political factors.** For example, job creation can be a political imperative for legislators supporting cultural district legislation.
- **Input from local districts and stakeholders.** For example, local stakeholders could be highly interested in development of specific retail businesses such as art galleries in certain corridors.
- **Input from model programs.** State programs have already learned much from asking each other for advice and modeling data collection efforts.
- **Input from researchers, professional evaluators, and influencing organizations.** States may contract with professional evaluators and employ data collection techniques necessary for economic impact reports or mixed method studies.
- **Other state or federal reporting requirements.** State art agencies already collect data from grantees relevant to cultural districts such as information on grantee revenues and beneficiaries.

NATIONAL INDICATOR SYSTEMS AND INITIATIVES

Looking specifically at the influence on the development of indicator systems from researchers, professional evaluators, and influencing organizations, many studies and initiatives have contributed to a robust collection of indicators relevant to cultural districts. A large number of indicators can be mined from reviewing prevalent national initiatives and studies. Some examples are:

- **The Urban Institute's Arts and Cultural Indicators Project:** This long standing initiative from the Urban Institute provides fundamental and sophisticated thinking toward the development of indicators to capture creativity and the arts within place-based initiatives.
- **Americans for the Arts' National and Local Arts Index:** Americans for the Arts' national and local indices provide a large amount of indicators relevant to the health and prevalence of the arts on both national and local scales.
- **ArtPlace's Vibrancy Indicators:** ArtPlace developed initial indicators to begin to broadly measure community vibrancy associated with the arts.
- **The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) Arts & Livability Indicators:** The NEA's Validating Arts and Livability Indicators (VALI) study delves into validating place-making indicators through immersed interaction with community members.
- **PolicyMap data as highlighted in Philadelphia's Culture Blocks:** The Culture Blocks project comes out of the Social Impact of the Arts Project at the University of Pennsylvania and although it is now solely focused in Philadelphia, it does provide an intriguing model for indicator data collection and implementation.

TABLE 3: A SAMPLING OF NATIONAL PLACE-BASED INDICATORS

| INDICATORS |
|--|
| Number of nonprofit arts and cultural organizations |
| Financial characteristics of art and cultural organizations |
| Number of creative businesses |
| Creative occupational and employment data |
| Number of works of public art |
| A variety of cultural participation indicators |
| Number of cultural events, fairs and festivals |
| Per capita number of artists |
| Population demographics (including income, race, age, education) |
| Homeownership community characteristics |
| Civic engagement characteristics |
| Commute times |
| Crime statistics |
| Employment statistics |
| Community migration |
| Community walk scores |
| Access to public transportation |
| Cell phone activity |
| Number of independent businesses |
| Availability of mixed use development |
| Public funding for the arts |
| Number of arts degrees per capita |
| Number of historic sites |
| Availability of training in the arts |
| Amateur art making measurements |
| Private and foundation investment in the arts |
| Number of museums and libraries |

Factors Influencing National Initiative Data Collection in Practice

While Urban Institute’s Arts and Cultural Indicators Project pulls perspectives from a number of initiatives, indicators enumerated in the other efforts are largely evolving over time. By analyzing a sample of indicators from these national efforts, we can infer a number of influencing factors for the selection of indicators:

- **Availability of data sources.** Collection of primary data, meaning collected directly from a source, such as what is done by surveying a population can be extremely expensive and time consuming. In order to both capitalize on the availability of high quality data collection and to efficiently collect indicators, national efforts collect data from large-scale sources such as the US Census or private data providers such as Nielsen.

- **Availability of data at specific geographic levels.** Indicators can only be comparable if they are available at the same geographic level such as city, state, county, ZIP code, census block, or other. Finding enough valid data available at the same geographic level can be challenging, especially as the geography gets smaller and smaller.
- **Validity of data sources.** Selecting indicators that are statistically valid at the level of detail necessary can be a challenge. Data availability from secondary sources and selecting levels of geography are contributing issues. Additionally, validity from the perspective of whether or not indicators are helpful in describing the creative economy or creative placemaking outcomes is another, perhaps more difficult challenge.
- **Availability of data across multiple communities.** Certain communities may have an abundance of extremely useful data based on prior initiatives, presence of foundations or other contributing factors. Unfortunately, these community data resources may not be comparable or available across multiple communities.

INDICATOR COMPARISONS

A number of intriguing trends emerge when comparing indicators used by states arts agencies with those created by national initiatives.

First, there is a major difference between the theoretical basis from which national efforts emerge and the policy basis from which state and local efforts are developed. For example, the research question at the national level could be, “Can we measure and compare creative vibrancy across multiple communities?” At the state and local level, there are specific policy goals that must be met. For example, state legislation or local statutes can mandate imperatives such as “create jobs within cultural districts.”

There are also differences in the composition of data. State and local data collection efforts are more focused on primary data, meaning data collected directly from district participants and residents, as opposed to secondary data that may come from national sources such as the Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. There is a greater need to compare multiple communities at the national level and a greater need to assess a particular community at the local level. Additionally, data collection efforts at the national level necessitate utilizing ongoing large scale survey efforts that would not be financially feasible for any individual arts agency or organization.

TABLE 4: COMPARISONS OF INDICATOR SYSTEM CHARACTERISTICS

| NATIONAL INDICATOR SYSTEMS | IMPLEMENTED STATE AND LOCAL DATA COLLECTION |
|--|---|
| Theoretical basis | Specific policy outcome basis |
| National data standardization considerations | Reporting burden considerations |
| Secondary data focused | Primary data focused |
| Heightened concerns over validity of sources | Challenges in primary collection mechanisms |
| Challenges with implementation resources | Challenges with implementation resources |

EVALUATION CHALLENGES

At the heart of data requirements and the selection of metrics lies the question of “how can we tell if cultural district policies are working?” We can prescribe some desired metrics to operationalize this question into measurable outcomes such as “more jobs,” “more artists,” “increased property values,” “more businesses,” and “increased tax receipts.” We could also index a variety of these metrics as measure of cultural district performance. However, it is difficult to tie changes in an index to intended outcomes. Is the intended outcome community revitalization? Is it improved economic conditions? What about improved social cohesion or increased human capital? What about externalities such as gentrification?

Pitfalls of indexing systems and outcomes measurements associated with creative vibrancy have been an ongoing topic of debate by cultural researchers. “Fuzzy concepts” of what contributes to community well-being remain a conceptual problem among practitioners.⁹ If economic growth solely contributed to healthy, sustainable, and vibrant communities, then we would only be concerned with impact of the arts on economic growth. More likely, there are multiple factors contributing to community well-being with the availability of cultural opportunities being one of them. Attempts at measuring the general well-being of individuals or communities outside of the arts, such the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index 10, are often multidimensional.¹⁰

The Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) has taken important steps to documenting the relationship between arts and culture and social well-being within a complex cultural ecology. SIAP’s work in developing measurements to better understand these relationships is still in its early stages and focused on a few urban areas, however, there have been promising preliminary results.¹¹

While acknowledging the difficulty in conceptualizing and measuring the outcomes of districts, state certified cultural districts present an intriguing opportunity for further research. The creation of state cultural districts and their mechanisms are well documented. Place based/arts based policy interventions could be an important area to examine the economic and social benefits of the arts. Formalized state level cultural district policies can provide well-defined policy goals against which to measure outcomes.

⁹ Ann Markusen “Fuzzy Concepts and Proxy Data” <http://createquity.com/2012/11/fuzzy-concepts-proxy-data-why-indicators-wont-track-creative-placemaking-success>

¹⁰ “Gallup-Healthways Well-being Index” <http://info.healthways.com/wellbeingindex>

¹¹ Mark Stern, “Measuring the outcomes of creative placemaking” delivered at the “Transatlantic Symposium. The Role of Artists & the Arts in Urban Resilience,” Baltimore, May 30-31, 2014. <http://impact.sp2.upenn.edu/siap/docs/Stern.BaltimoreTalk.10aug2014.v4revisions.pdf>

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Challenges to evaluating the outcomes of cultural districts at the state and local level are likely to remain for the foreseeable future. Regardless of these challenges, documentation of the quantitative and anecdotal success of cultural districts continues to mount. As cultural district managers further contemplate program evaluation, information from peers, researchers and national initiatives will all be helpful in navigating this complex territory. No matter what evaluative approach emerges as a best practice, cultural district practitioners should continue to work to collect data most relevant to their communities.

Even with robust data collection, proving the influence of arts based initiatives on community well-being remains difficult. But fortunately, definitively showing that the arts cause community well-being in cultural districts is not necessarily the most important part of developing indicators—especially from the perspective of practicing cultural district managers. A more valuable use of indicators to practitioners will be to point to incremental progress made in cultural districts, with the understanding that the arts and creativity are one vital component of sustainable and healthy communities.

Ideally, state and local arts agencies would be able to create systems to evaluate cultural district policies by combining data received directly from local districts (including qualitative input), from state labor and revenue sources and from nationally collected level labor market and census data. Systems would be built from the ground up with input from professional evaluators, the agencies themselves, and community stakeholders. Systems would be both comparable across multiple communities and intuitively valid to the communities themselves. This type of approach would be very similar to the “four tiers” identified by the Urban Institute’s Arts and Cultural Indicators Project.¹² However, capacity issues are likely to restrain fully realized, robust mixed methods approaches in practice and this may not be the optimal way to efficiently satisfy the needs of arts administrators and policymakers.

There are a few guiding principles that can help cultural district practitioners work toward practical and valid cultural district metrics:

¹² Maria Rosario Jackson, Florence Kabwasa-Green, Joaquin Herranz, “Creative Vitality in Communities: Interpretation and Indicators” The Urban Institute, 2006 http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/311392_Cultural_Vitality.pdf

- **Collect data directly from the district.** Primary data collected directly from those most immediately participating in a district is an intuitive place to learn about a cultural district. Having both qualitative and quantitative information on artists, organizations, and businesses in the district will be essential for both evaluation and case-making.
- **Find available data on community characteristics.** Secondary data describing the characteristics of a district and the surrounding community may be readily available and will help to articulate demographic and social characteristics. It will also be helpful to track how these characteristics change over time.
- **Collect data with an eye toward evaluation.** Thinking about evaluation from the beginning of an initiative is especially important. This could involve hiring a consultant at an early stage or to simply begin collecting relevant data right away. This also means consistently collecting these data.
- **Gather input from key stakeholders including communities, policymakers, and arts organizations.** Knowledge of what kind of information is important to key constituencies will help to design data collection methods immediately applicable to articulating program benefits.
- **Collect comparable data across multiple communities.** Having at least some data that can be compared across similar communities is helpful to creating context as well as potentially establishing some controlled variables for research.
- **Measurements should be valid to the communities themselves.** Consulting within a community about the intuitive validity of cultural district indicators can be an excellent way to validate potential indicators.

About the Author

Ryan Stubbs oversees National Assembly of State Arts Agencies' (NASAA) data collection and research services. In this role, Ryan directs NASAA's tracking of public funding for the arts and its work as the national repository of state arts agency grantmaking data. He assists NASAA members with customized research, including creative economy programs, placemaking initiatives, and assessment of cultural district programs. Ryan represents state arts agencies and NASAA at state, regional and NASAA research forums and is NASAA's primary research liaison to federal agencies, foundations, consultants, and scholars conducting research on public support for the arts.

Americans for the Arts is the nation's leading nonprofit organization for advancing the arts in America. With more than 50 years of service, we are dedicated to representing and serving local communities and creating opportunities for every American to participate in and appreciate all forms of the arts.



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