

*v. 31*

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## INVESTING IN THE LONG VIEW

### How Do We Know the Arts Matter?

“If we are ever going to assemble a compelling body of evidence about whether arts engagement shapes lives over time, we simply have to face down the complications and costs of longitudinal evaluation.”

How do we know the arts matter? Where is the added value? What is the evidence that investing in the arts has an impact?

These are questions that arts presenters, administrators, and artists and performers working in the public sector are pressed to answer daily—by public agencies, donors, foundations, and journalists. Increasingly, public and private audiences alike insist on evidence-based answers and on having those answers in relatively short order, often by the end of the project, program, exhibition, or series. While accountability is important, the irony is that perhaps the greatest benefit the arts contribute to individuals and their communities—improvements to participants’ *long-term* quality of life—take time to emerge. Immediate answers are often doomed to be partial ones. Consequently, the purpose of this issue of *Sounding Board* is to explore what can be learned from investments



Photography: Kevin P. Casey

in the long-term results of arts engagement at the individual, institutional, and community levels. To this end, we share two core arguments:

1. **By investing in inquiry into long-term effects, we can secure some of the most robust evidence that the arts make a difference to the quality of life;**
2. **Long-term research is *not* an out-of-reach luxury. There are innovative and collaborative strategies that make it feasible, affordable, and generative for the field.**

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## The Importance of Long-term Inquiry: Capturing Far-reaching Consequences

In fields like education and medicine investigators have illustrated the importance of pursuing long-term research with the same individuals, particularly when trying to understand such complex questions such as who thrives, who is resilient in the face of hardship, and why. In so doing, these patient researchers have uncovered both slow-to-emerge and surprising patterns of development that shorter-term studies could never capture. They have also helped to frame national conversations about what investments make a difference over the long haul.

Consider how longitudinal research conducted by the Abecedarian Project has shaped our understanding of the importance of investing in early childhood. Between 1972 and 1977 a group of 54 young children from low-income families were randomly assigned to receive five years of high-quality early education. Beginning as early as 6 months and continuing throughout 54 months, the children in the control group performed better on tests of cognitive and social development. But only by following these same children into early adulthood did investigators uncover unpredicted, long-term benefits to the participants' *quality of life*. As young adults, participating children were more likely to attend college, hold full-time jobs, and be healthier. The point is two-fold. First, only with longitudinal studies do we learn about lasting (as compared to fleeting) effects. Second, longitudinal studies have much to teach us about the persistent ripple effects of investing in the quality of peoples' lives. Who could have predicted that early childhood learning would underlie not only adults' level of education, but also their employability and overall health?

In a similar spirit, William Bowen and Derek Bok demonstrated the long-term consequences of race-sensitive admissions at highly selective colleges in the 1970s by tracing the lives of more than

45,000 students throughout their college years. Bowen and Bok could speak to short-term outcomes: six-year graduation rates and advanced degrees for Black students were much higher (75% and 40% respectively) than affirmative action skeptics would have predicted. But only by collecting data on these former students' mid-life activities did researchers identify the full consequences of these admissions policies: Black graduates of these colleges were more likely than their counterparts to become leaders of community, social-service, and professional organizations, working to build communities where opportunity was equalized. Appropriately, the authors borrowed an image from one of Mark Twain's river pilots for the title of their book, *The Shape of the River*, arguing that investments in human lives often play out across a long and winding course. Even in 2013, as the US Supreme Court set a still higher bar for using race as one criterion in college admissions, data on the long-term consequences of diverse student bodies continue to inform that debate.

These two examples speak loudly to the intensifying search for measurable impacts of social investments. Immediate outcomes matter, but they may be far from the whole story. Other equally significant effects may not be observable by the "end" of a given project, not because they do not exist, but because they are waiting downstream, around the bends in the river.

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## Evidence from Long-term Research in the Arts

In the arts, findings from long-term studies have been productive, whether they are retrospective inquiries, research on successive cohorts, or genuine longitudinal studies of the same individuals.

**Retrospective Inquiries:** Agnes Gund, the American philanthropist, arts patron, and advocate for arts education, recalls the well-spring of her lifelong commitment to museums:

My education in the arts began at the Cleveland Museum of Art. As a Cleveland child, I visited the Museum's halls and corridors, gallery spaces and shows, over and over. For me, the Cleveland Museum was a school of my very own—the place where my eyes opened, my tastes developed, my ideas about beauty and creativity grew. I remember how often, time and again, I returned to one piece: an ancient Chinese statue of lacquered wood called "Cranes and Serpents," a piece as tall as I was, or taller. Serpents curl at the statue's base; two cranes rise tall from the base, leaning away from each other, bound by the serpents at their feet. It is hard to tell why a statue from the Chinese Period of the Warring States so captured me as a little girl... Whatever drew me to "Cranes and Serpents," though, it has been a touchstone ever since for the inspiration of art in my life.<sup>1</sup>



Steven Krull Photography

When researchers take these kinds of long-term recollections seriously, there are rewards. Asked to recall their early musical experiences, orchestra audiences reveal that 74% of the subscribers and 71% of the single ticket buyers either played an instrument or sang in a choir at some point in their lives, suggesting that early engagement may fuel a lifelong affinity for music.<sup>2</sup>

**Cohort Studies:** SNAAP (Strategic National Arts Alumni Project) is an online survey that checks in with graduates of arts schools across the evolving course of their post-graduate careers and provides their institutions with vital information about how their training did and did not fuel their lives and work.<sup>3</sup>

Using these kinds of data sets, institutions can begin to chart their impact on students 1, 2, 5, and 10 or more years out. (Last year the

oldest SNAAP respondent was 105!). Sarah Bainter Cunningham, Executive Director of Research, School of the Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), explains:

Last spring, the local newspaper was going to report that VCU Sculpture and Painting graduates have the lowest first-year earnings of all VCU graduates. Fortunately, when the reporter reached out to us for a quote, we were ready: we knew from the SNAAP data that 92% of VCU alumni report “good” or “excellent” experience, and that 92% of alumni would recommend VCU arts to others. Moreover, the *over-time* nature of SNAAP data allowed me to share that 34% of alumni have their first job before leaving campus, and 80% of our alumni are employed in their first job within

<sup>1</sup> Gund, Agnes. (2013). “About a Museum.” The Huffington Post. 02/14/2013. Retrieved from: [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/agnes-gund/about-a-museum\\_b\\_2686882.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/agnes-gund/about-a-museum_b_2686882.html), April 16, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Audience Insight LLC. (2002). *Classical Music Consumer Segmentation Study: How Americans Relate to Classical Music and their Local Orchestras*. (Miami, FL: Knight Foundation, p. A-164.

<sup>3</sup> Lindeman, Danielle J. and Tepper, Steven J., (2012). Painting with Broader Strokes: Reassessing the Value of an Arts Degree. *Strategic National Arts Alumni Project. New SNAAP Report Counters Prevailing Views for Assessing Educational Value. December 4,*

12 months of graduation. We also know that more than half of our alumni currently work full or part-time creating or performing their own work, ranking higher than national averages on employment as artists. Likewise, 38% of our grads have been in creative occupations for more than 15 years. So, the potential impression that our recent graduates were destined to be frustrated low-earners could be countered immediately. The SNAAP data are re-making the stereotypical life story of the struggling artist whose studio education dead-ends in waiting tables or “temping.”

By looking beyond immediate effects, these kinds of long-term inquiries change the time horizon for thinking about the effects of arts engagement. The reward for taking the long view is that a set of “slow-release,” long-term effects come into focus—effects that we can’t afford to overlook in building an argument for the place of the arts in human lives.

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## Reaping Longitudinal Research in the Arts

But currently, very few studies of the arts employ genuine longitudinal methods, following *the same individuals or entities over time* in order to understand what Bowen and Bok called “the shape of the river.” Partly, this is because full-blown longitudinal evaluation is both challenging and expensive. (Just think about the hours it takes to track down subjects through their changing lives. Or think about convincing a new executive director to keep up a study of alumni that her predecessor initiated.) But not making the investment in longitudinal work brings on the steepest cost of all: falsely concluding that the arts have limited impact when, in fact, those effects just don’t spring up immediately in neat linear ways, or in the expected places. If we are ever going to assemble a compelling body of evidence about whether arts engagement shapes lives over time, we simply have to face down the complications and costs of longitudinal evaluation. As a starting point, consider the following examples of short-term longitudinal studies that have had considerable impact.

### 1. Creative Aging.

In their groundbreaking research on creative aging, Gene Cohen and his team of researchers followed elders (with an average age of 80) from a baseline year through two additional years, looking at the effects of weekly engagement in intensive arts learning in a treatment group as compared to a well-matched control group of seniors. The team identified a surprising array of outcomes that went beyond the predicted increases in sense of well-being and frequency of community activity. In addition, the study identified true health promotion effects, including fewer doctor visits, fewer accidents and falls, and less dependency on medications. Because the study followed the *same seniors over time*, it was possible to chart the course of change and point to maximized independence and decreased dependency that persisted well past the novelty stage. Such outcomes have major implications for cost-effective, respectful, and non-invasive designs for long-term care in an aging population.<sup>4</sup> This work, along with similar studies, provided the research grounding for the field now known as creative aging, with its “cobweb” orchestras, senior choirs, and museum programs for patients with Alzheimer’s Disease.<sup>5</sup>

### 2. Youth Development.

In a similar spirit, a team of researchers led by James Catterall used four national longitudinal databases to ask, “What difference does arts engagement make in the lives of teen-agers and young adults?”<sup>6</sup> When young people placed at risk by poverty became highly engaged in the arts, they were more likely to thrive, even into their mid-twenties. They earned higher grades and were more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in, and complete college. Moreover, all groups of students with arts-rich histories were more likely than their peers to engage and give back by volunteering, voting, and participating in local or school politics. These correlations cannot point us to cause. Other factors, such as family influences or the schools students attend, might underlie both arts participation and the resulting positive outcomes. At the same time, these patterns suggest that the arts may be one of several ecologies that sustain and promote the resilience of young people. These longitudinal findings have injected new life into a national movement to make the arts an integral, rather than an optional, part of a well-rounded education that prepares all young people for college and career.

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<sup>4</sup> Cohen, Gene. “The Creativity and Aging Study”. (2006). *The National Endowment for the Arts and George Washington University*. Retrieved from: [www.nea.gov/resources/accessibility/CnA-Rep4-30-06.pdf](http://www.nea.gov/resources/accessibility/CnA-Rep4-30-06.pdf), February 20, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> “The MoMA Alzheimer’s Project: Making Art Accessible to People with Dementia: A Guide for Museums”. Retrieved from <http://www.moma.org/docs/learn/GuideforMuseums.pdf>, April 16, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Catterall, James, Dumais, Susan, and Hampden-Thompson, Susan. (2012). *The Arts and Achievement in At-risk Students*. Washington, DC: The National Endowment for the Arts.

<sup>7</sup> *Social Impact of the Arts Project*. Retrieved from: <http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/siap>, April 16, 2013.

### 3. Community Well-Being.

Longitudinal research can also reveal trajectories in the lives of communities. Researchers at the Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP) have tracked links between cultural engagement, social diversity, and community capacity-building in Philadelphia neighborhoods over time.<sup>7</sup> By sticking with the same set of communities, researchers have demonstrated that throughout the 1980s and 1990s, low-income neighborhoods that were home to many cultural providers or participants were three to four times more likely to revitalize as other comparable areas. Even among the highest risk neighborhoods, those that hosted multiple cultural organizations within one-half mile were three to four times more likely to see their poverty decline and population increase than those with few cultural groups. Moreover, the same long-term research showed that residents who participate in local arts and cultural networks tend to engage in other types of community activities as well. Because they have witnessed similar patterns in culturally engaged but otherwise varied neighborhoods over time, SIAP researchers have been in a position to argue that cultural activity is one of the factors that builds what Felton Earls has termed “collective efficacy,” defined as a heightened level of social cohesion among neighbors combined with a willingness to intervene on behalf of each other and the common good.<sup>8</sup> Think about friends introducing neighbors into a local cross-denominational gospel choir, residents offering after-school employment to young people they know through their children, or parents sharing places in line while they register their sons and daughters at public schools with strong arts programs. This sort of longitudinal work has the potential to reveal the benefits of the arts across the broader, inter-generational span of the lives of communities. In presenting a fuller picture of the consequences of arts engagement for neighborhood life, SIAP’s work has fueled the development of Culture Blocks,<sup>9</sup> a free mapping tool that visualizes powerful data about Philadelphia’s creative and cultural assets (ranging from major institutions to local “treasures”) within the context of other important economic, demographic, and geographic data. City agencies and other civic partners will use the data to better understand the role that culture plays in the development and health of neighborhoods. This data could also inform municipal discussions about cultural policy: Should scarce arts dollars go into a downtown theater complex or toward



revitalizing high school auditoriums throughout the city? How do we learn about the long-term benefits of each investment strategy?

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## Upcoming Longitudinal Studies

Taking the long view is a strategy with many applications that could yield considerable benefit in building our understanding of the lasting consequences of arts engagement. Here are several possibilities that WolfBrown is pursuing with clients:

### 1. Lifelong relationships with the art forms.

Arts participation research is typically conducted on a “snapshot” basis, offering valuable information about ‘here and now participation’ or the intrinsic impact of encounters with works and

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<sup>8</sup> Stern, Mark and Seifert, Susan. (2008). “From Creative Economy to Creative Society”. *Social Impact of the Arts Project, University of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, PA*. Retrieved from: [http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/siap/docs/cultural\\_and\\_community\\_revitalization/creative\\_economy.pdf](http://www.sp2.upenn.edu/siap/docs/cultural_and_community_revitalization/creative_economy.pdf), August 3, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Crimmins, Peter. “Philly Maps Culture Blocks.” (2013). Retrieved from: <http://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/Philly-Maps-Cultural-Blocks-205375651.html>, August 3, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Brown, Alan and Ratzkin, Rebecca. (2012). *Understanding the Intrinsic Impact of Live Theater: Patterns of Audience Feedback across 18 Theatres and 58 Productions*. From “Counting New Beans,” San Francisco, CA: WolfBrown.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.nea.gov/research/2008-sppa.pdf>, August 7, 2013.



Photography: Tim Chumley

performances.<sup>10</sup> Research based on repeated snapshots (e.g., the NEA's Survey of Public Participation in the Arts) reveals how tastes and habits evolve.<sup>11</sup> But we lack a fundamental understanding of how the *same* individuals progress in their relationship to the arts over time in the way that Agnes Gund describes. What makes for ignition, what erodes or extinguishes that spark, or what keeps it alive? As a start, the Barr Foundations and Klarman Family Foundations in Boston have funded a study of the routes to mastery for young people pursuing a range of art forms, starting with classical music, but growing to include others. A key feature of the work is the broad definition of what it means to achieve mastery, including not only performers and creators, but also individuals who use their artistry to teach, mentor, or engage in community development. The work will look at the initial spark, the supports, and the barriers that allow young people to enter, persist, and contribute to fields like instrumental music, dance, and visual or media arts. At the core of the work is the question, "What does it take to build a city in which any young person's interests and talents can be realized as a lifelong involvement in the arts?"

## 2. Sustained arts learning: Are there lifelong consequences?

"Play on Philly!" offers 15 hours of instruction in classical music every week to over 200 children in Philadelphia. Its Chief Executive, Stanford Thompson, is interested in a number of short-term outcomes, including musical prowess and academic achievement. But Thompson is just as convinced that students' time in "Play on Philly!" has longer-term consequences, including the development of higher-order decision-making and problem-solving strategies (i.e., executive function) that enables individuals to establish long-term goals, pursue them across rough patches, and reap

satisfaction from striving.<sup>12</sup> As Thompson notes, "By fostering these abilities over time in our most vulnerable children, we provide them with their best chance to develop into responsible citizens and contributing members of society."

Working with "Play on Philly!," WolfBrown is collecting longitudinal data from students' schools and parents about a wide range of adaptive behaviors that signal executive functions such as doing homework, sticking with projects, or practicing their instruments regularly at home. We anticipate that even in the early years of the evaluation we will be able to observe differences between students chosen at random to participate in the program and students randomly assigned to the program's waiting list. We predict that these differences will become progressively larger, signifying that students in the program are on a distinctly different developmental trajectory than their peers. Moreover, the study design calls for following these *same* students long enough to see whether their sustained engagement in "Play on Philly!" culminates in a set of important outcomes in addition to musical proficiency. These would include increased rates of high school graduation, pursuit of postsecondary education, and a commitment to the broader community. *If* these longitudinal findings emerge, it could prompt a shift in the discussion of the role of the arts in early human development, potentially recasting the sharp dichotomy between intrinsic and instrumental outcomes of arts education. In short, there would be evidence that the in-depth pursuit of artistry brings with it certain habits or ways of being that can have far-reaching consequences.

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## Making It Feasible

Just mention longitudinal research and people imagine years of work, skyrocketing costs, and wild adventures tracking down missing participants. There is no question that there are challenges. But if we want the insights and the evidence, it is time to make taking the longer view feasible. Here are key strategies taken from actual organizations:

### 1. Banding together—Research collaboratives.

"Play on Philly!" has many sister organizations as enterprising musicians start El Sistema-inspired nucleos across the country. Already, Youth Orchestra Salinas (YOSAL) in California and the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, in partnership with University Heights Charter School, are planning similar longitudinal studies. Each organization has tailored the core design to track outcomes valued by their unique communities (e.g., constructive and

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<sup>12</sup> Thompson has reason to be hopeful as his work is based on principles first developed in the El Sistema, the Venezuelan orchestral program that has demonstrated the profound impact intensive involvement in classical music can have on children's lives. See Tunstall, Tricia. (2012). *Changing Lives: Gustavo Dudamel, El Sistema, and the Transformative Power of Music*. New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co.

collaborative behaviors, character and leadership development). The work is just beginning. With their shared goals and longitudinal designs, these parallel studies could potentially share tools, data collections strategies, and findings.

## 2. Foundations—Sparks and partners.

The SNAAP project described earlier is run by the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research in collaboration with the Vanderbilt University Curb Center for Art, Enterprise, and Public Policy. Additional funding is provided by the SURDNA Foundation, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Houston Endowment, and others. Investments in such collaborative projects and tools like SNAAP would enable substantial long-term research that single institutions could never afford if they operated alone. What if additional foundations with a core commitment to the arts helped to launch longitudinal studies at other organizations that make long-term investments in changing individual or community lives? And what if that funding included dollars to develop strong research designs and train staff as co-researchers?

In Santa Ana, CA, “The Wooden Floor,” an organization focused on youth development through dance, is launching a longitudinal study of its students from the time of enrollment in elementary school through college. The study is a result of the Wooden Floor’s long-term commitment to youth and the James Irvine Foundation’s interest in developing more diverse audiences for the arts. Based in part on the support from the Foundation, in collaboration with researcher James Catterall, the organization will be looking for both artistic and academic outcomes.

Investments such as these provide examples of how foundations—acting singly or with partners—can spark and support long-term research. They also point to the power that foundations have to move the field to thinking about more than short-term outcomes. Finally, these kinds of investments challenge foundations to make core commitments that they are willing to pursue across changes in leadership, market fluctuations, and changing issues.

## 3. National Arts Service Organizations— Amplifiers and multipliers.

National arts service organizations have access to large and stable bases of members in particular areas of the arts, a mandate to learn about the field, and the power to spread the word and build practice on the basis of long-term research. In many ways, these organizations are logical entities to develop the collaboratives, tools, and dissemination plans that spread the findings and implications from long-term research in the arts field. For example, drawing on the longitudinal studies of creative aging mentioned above, the

National Guild for Community Arts Education, supported by the MetLife Foundation, has developed a grants program to identify and share best practices in this field. Their example points to the powerful role for national service organizations in building an appetite for long-term studies and translating them to effective programs.

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## Stepping Back: The Consequences of Conducting Longitudinal Work

Longitudinal work is about tracking the long-term course and consequences of experiences on individuals, families, and communities. But there are also effects on the institutions that invest in such work. Eina McHugh, the Director of “The Ark” a children’s cultural center in Dublin, Ireland explains the transformative power of the long view:

“The Ark” had established an international reputation for children’s programming when its staff began to hear that the city’s low-income children and families thought of it as “posh” and “not for them.” So, with the community, we designed “ArkLink,” a children’s art initiative located in Fatima Mansions, a public housing project that housed some of the city’s more disadvantaged families.

We spent those first three years building the understanding of how to do the work well and how to earn trust in the community. If we stopped there the project would never have become itself. To do really innovative work takes a long time. It’s like creative work; it has got to start in chaos.

We got three more years of funding to push the work forward. We transformed one of the flats into a permanent studio, hired a full-time manager, and expanded to include the younger and older siblings who wanted in. Then is when we saw significant changes in children’s language, school achievement, art skills, and self-confidence.<sup>13</sup> By 2006, local partners were ready to take over ArkLink as a permanent part of a renovated neighborhood.

But The Ark itself was changed. The work opened up the institution’s horizons forever. Now we know what it takes to do truly innovative work. Even in this terrible economy, we won’t be seduced by short-term, change-the-world-in-a-year funding. We look at proposals and say, “If we can make this the first phase of something lasting, then yes. If not, then it’s not our work.”

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<sup>13</sup> *The Ark Trust. ArkLink Initiative in Fatima Mansions. Dublin, Ireland. (2007). Retrieved from <http://ark.ie/downloads/Arklink.pdf>, February 20, 2012.*

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<http://arts.vcu.edu>. The site provides an overview of the school's wide array of programs and projects that make it a premier school for art and design.

Sally Gaiskill, Director, *Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP)*  
<http://snaap.indiana.edu/>. The site for the project contains background, reports on early findings, a sample questionnaire, and other materials.

Eina McHugh, Director, *The Ark*  
<http://ark.ie/>. The site contains background, links to the cultural policies from which the Centre began, the ArtsLink report, and lively video clips of the work.

Stanford Thompson, Chief Executive Director, *Play on Philly!*  
<http://www.playonphilly.org/>. The site contains profiles of special projects and video clips of recent performances.

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