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Three Perspectives on the 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts

In 2008, the National Endowment for the Arts conducted a Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) in partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau. The final report of this survey, which includes comparison data for similar studies conducted in 1982, 1992 and 2002, presents a wealth of information on arts and culture attendance rates over the past twenty-five years.

Three new research studies, commissioned by the NEA, analyze the data gathered from the 2008 survey to address three specific topics: 1) the correlation between age and arts participation, 2) the effect of personally performing in or creating artworks on individual levels of arts attendance, and 3) the influence of arts education on participation in the arts. The published reports of these studies, now available on the NEA website (see below) present new insights into current audience demographics and trends, challenge current views about core factors that will influence the future of arts participation in the United States, and provide new ideas on how to frame strategies to increase participation in arts and culture “benchmark” events. In this edition of Arts Insights, we present an overview of these reports.

AGE AND ARTS PARTICIPATION

Common wisdom, much of it founded on findings from earlier NEA studies, has held that an individual's age is an excellent indicator of attendance patterns. But in *Age and Arts Participation: A Case against Demographic Destiny*, Mark J. Stern finds that some earlier assumptions were misleading. After accounting for other factors, his analysis of the data from 1982 – 2008 suggests that a person's age is actually a poor predictor of the number of arts events they will attend once other variables are considered. Indeed, Stern shows that the current age distribution of arts audiences closely reflects the proportions of each age group in the general population.

As Bonnie Nichols of NEA's Office of Research & Analysis points out, “These results suggest that the effect of age on arts participation, though not zero, is marginal. As the other SPPA research reports have found, educational attainment is a far better predictor of arts participation.”

On the surface, the 2008 SPPA study, like earlier surveys, seems to point to long-term declines for attendance at most types of arts events by suggesting a declining representation of younger audience members. But just because the “average” adult audience member in 2008 was six years older than in 1982 (45 as opposed to 39) it doesn't necessarily follow that younger audiences are slipping through the cracks. Stern shows that the distribution of audience members between 18 and 29 years old, as well as older audience members 60 years and older, closely corresponds to their age bracket's share of the general population during the corresponding years.

A variable known as the ‘index of representativeness’ shows how participation by a particular age group compares to their share of the general population. In 1982 this index was 11 for those 18 to 29 years old, meaning that the size of their representation in arts audiences exceeded their share of the general adult

population by 11%. By 2008, the index for this age group had fallen to 0, which means their attendance level matched their share of the adult population, showing zero percent difference from their proportional share. Additionally, in 1982, the index of representativeness was -32 for adults 60 and above. By 2008 it had risen to -13. In other words, the number of audience members over age 60 now more closely matches their makeup of the general population but is still underrepresented.

Other cultural disciplines show similar results, although the youngest segment of ballet audiences is still underrepresented. The notable exception is classical music, whose audience has significantly aged. Audience members under age 30 for classical concerts fell from an index of -11 in 1982 to an index of -26 by 2008, while the index for those 60 or older jumped from -18 to of 22.

CULTURAL OMNIVORES

In each of the SPPA studies since 1982, the NEA has focused upon a select group of what it terms "benchmark" arts activities on which to focus their attention when surveying patterns of attendance and participation. This core group of activities, repeated from study to study, includes jazz, classical music, opera, musical or non-musical plays, ballet performances, and visits to art museums or art galleries.

The number of U.S. adults attending such "benchmark" arts events declined from 39% in 1982 to 34.6% in 2008. The current economic recession (which had been under way for six months during the 2008 data collection period) may have negatively impacted attendance figures for that year. Stern posits that another likely contributor is that there are now fewer "cultural omnivores", who he defines as those who not only attend the arts frequently, but attend a wide variety of benchmark events. And while he finds that age and "cohort" (those who have been in a similar age group during a particular time span - for example baby boomers) are not particularly good predictors of arts participation, they do seem to have a strong influence on the likelihood that an individual is a "cultural omnivore."

Stern shows that the members of the World War II generation were more likely to become cultural omnivores than are those of Generation X. Early Baby Boomers also showed stronger likelihood to become omnivores. So it follows that, as these generations aged, the percentage of cultural omnivores as a share of the population declined. Indeed, he finds that in 1982 15% of SPPA respondents could be classified as omnivores, but by 2008 they made up only 10% of the total. The annual number of events that omnivores attended also fell, dropping more by than one event per person between 2002 and 2008. Stern estimates that as much as 82% of the decline in the total number of benchmark activities attended during this period can be explained by fewer cultural omnivores attending fewer arts events.

BEYOND BENCHMARKING – INCREASED PARTICIPATION REVEALED

A second new report, *Beyond Attendance: A Multi-Modal Understanding of Arts Participation*, by Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard and Alan S. Brown explores participation in the arts beyond the parameters of benchmark activities. One interesting result of their analysis is the finding that adults who have taken art classes at any time in their lives are more than 20% more likely to attend benchmark arts activities than those who have not, even after controlling for other variables such as gender, age, and race. They find that a broader definition of arts engagement, one which includes activities beyond attending benchmark activities, yields a new perspective on participation in the arts. For example, even excluding literary reading, 2008 SPPA data show that 74% of American adults performed an arts activity when the definition of such an activity includes the creation of art or participation in the arts via broadcasts or recordings, including performances accessed via the internet. This rate is more than double that reported for attendance at "benchmark" arts events.

ARTS EDUCATION IN CHILDHOOD – A KEY PREDICTOR

Novak-Leonard and Brown find that compared with adults who have only a grade-school education, adults with at least some college are about 20% more likely to attend a benchmark arts event, regardless of their gender, age, race, income, or regardless of if they live in an urban/metro area. For adults with graduate degrees, the likelihood is more than 40% greater.

Similar to the findings for arts attendance, the likelihood that a person creates or performs also rises with education. An adult with a graduate degree, for example, is 23% more likely to create art or perform than one whose highest level of training is elementary school. But when data on whether or not individuals have taken any type of arts classes or lessons is added to the model, levels of educational attainment no longer effectively predict an individual's likelihood of creating or performing art. Indeed, knowing whether an individual has had arts education during childhood is one of the best predictors of an individual's arts participation in adulthood, including both arts attendance and the making of art. The study finds that adults who have taken arts classes at any time in their lives, regardless of education level, are 32% more likely to create art of their own. It also finds that arts attendance rates among adults who themselves create art are, depending on discipline, two to five times higher than for those who do not create art.

These results suggest that successful audience building strategies may need to shift from age-centered strategies for engagement to programs that consist of art-making and personal performance combined with live attendance opportunities, as well as strategies to attract audiences who have those shared experiences and education. Novak-Leonard and Brown suggest several strategies for engaging and increasing audiences, including an emphasizing the involvement of local artists in the organization's artistic output, providing opportunities for interpretation and interaction during performances and exhibits, offering artistic instruction on-site and online, and developing expanded context-building activities and opportunities for dialogue with artists and others.

THE IMPACT OF ARTS INSTRUCTION

The critical importance of arts education's influence on arts participation rates is highlighted by the work of Nick Rabkin and E.C. Hedberg in a third report. Arts Education in America: What the Declines Mean for Arts Participation looks at data from 1982 through 2008 to discover that adults who took childhood classes in at least one art form were about 50% more likely to attend a "benchmark" arts event, compared with adults who took no childhood arts classes. Noting that budget constraints in recent years and a shift in emphasis toward "basic" subjects have led to a decline in public school arts instruction since the late 1970's, the authors hypothesize that the current decline in the number of young adults participating in the arts may be "in large measure the result of cuts in school-based arts instruction."

The report also finds that this decline has been sharper for Americans whose parents are less educated. For example, rates of participation in arts classes for children whose parents' highest level of educational attainment is less than a high school diploma, declined from 54% to 13% from 1982-2008. SPPA data also reveals a large race/ethnicity gap in childhood arts learning. In 1992, nearly 44% of young African Americans had taken arts classes when they were children. By 2008, that percentage fell to 28%, a 16-point decline compared to a 7-point decline for whites, 60% of whom reported having had some arts training in school.

In 2008, the benchmark arts attendance rate for white adults was roughly twice that of African Americans, but other research conducted by the NEA has shown that race and ethnicity are misleading predictors of arts participation. Once other variables, particularly educational attainment, are considered, the impact of race and ethnicity have almost no measureable effect on the likelihood of an individual's participation in the arts. In just one example, the 2008 SPPA data indicates that African Americans are 58% more likely than whites to go to a jazz concert. But if you add level of education to the model, race becomes statistically insignificant.

CREATING A NEW COHORT OF CULTURAL OMNIVORES

By showing that education, specifically arts education and the experience of creating art, is often the portal through which people learn to appreciate and participate in the arts, the data in these reports provides a new perspective on the case for arts education in our schools. Now, in addition to the arts and culture industry's efforts to advocate and educate regarding the socioeconomic impact that the arts have on individuals and communities, conversations about the size and composition of future audiences and the

health of arts and culture organizations must include information about the importance of providing early access to arts education and opportunities to create of art. The potential for increased impact on communities where programs created by such an approach are woven into the mission of local arts organizations could foreshadow a bright future for cultural participation in the U.S.

CONCLUSION

Each of these Survey of Public Participation in the Arts reports identifies important new ways to interpret current trends in individual participation in the arts. Organizations are now challenged to further invest in market research and technology to track such audience preferences and participation patterns in their communities in order to inform a new strategic approach, revealing insights beyond the familiar mantra that "we need to reach younger audiences."

RESOURCES

Arts Participation 2008, published by the National Endowment for the Arts Office of Research & Analysis. An overview of findings from the 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts.

<http://www.nea.gov/research/NEA-SPPA-brochure.pdf>

Much of the information in this article was drawn from: National Endowment for the Arts Research Note #101, Three NEA Monographs on Arts Participation: A Research Digest, by Bonnie Nichols, NEA Office of Research & Analysis. This very helpful summary available at <http://www.nea.gov/research/Notes/101.pdf>

National Endowment for the Arts Research Report #52, Arts Education in America: What the Declines Mean for Arts Participation, by Nick Rabkin and E.C. Hedberg, NORC at the University of Chicago.

<http://www.arts.gov/research/2008-SPPA-ArtsLearning.pdf>

National Endowment for the Arts Research Report #53, Age and Arts Participation: A Case against Demographic Destiny, by Mark J. Stern, University of Pennsylvania. <http://www.arts.gov/research/2008-SPPA-Age.pdf>

National Endowment for the Arts Research Report #54, Beyond Attendance: A Multi-Modal Understanding of Arts Participation, by Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard and Alan S. Brown, WolfBrown.

<http://www.arts.gov/research/2008-SPPA-BeyondAttendance.pdf>

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