

Research Brief

Research in the Arts



A New Framework for Building Participation in the Arts

Offering a new framework for understanding and influencing arts participation: Behavioral model looks at different entry points, stages of participation

For nearly 20 years, The Wallace Foundation has been spearheading efforts to make the arts and culture an active part of people's everyday lives. Many arts institutions are re-examining their missions and their roles in what has become an increasingly complex arts environment. Concurrently, arts policy appears to be shifting its focus from influencing the supply and quality of the arts to increasing the public access to and experience with the arts.

In this context, it is not surprising that many arts institutions are seeking ways to increase the public's access and exposure to their activities. They seek not only to expand their markets and increase their revenues but to broaden the definition of art and reinvent themselves. They face a problem, however, in determining how to go about increasing public participation. Despite their commitment, these institutions often do not have the expertise and resources needed to design and implement effective approaches. As a result, they tend to use hit-or-miss approaches, ending up uncertain about why what they tried did or did not work and thus unable to draw general lessons from their experiences.

To better understand these developments, the Foundation commissioned RAND to examine the innovative ways arts and cultural organizations attract new audiences, reach a larger share of existing audiences, and deepen the involvement of current participants. The study explores why

people participate in arts and cultural activities and what institutions can do to encourage their participation. It also looks at how arts and cultural organizations can balance the twin goals of fostering participation and ensuring artistic quality. As the first study to look at arts participation systemically, its findings should help arts organizations increase cultural participation in communities nationwide.

In the first phase of the study, the RAND team developed a theoretical model (see figure) to examine the factors that are most likely to influence an individual's decision to participate in the arts. This model is based on a review of related studies, as well as interviews with a number of arts organizations that have received audience-building grants from the Foundation. During the second phase of the work, RAND surveyed more than 100 administrators of arts organizations that are engaged in similar efforts. With the survey results, the RAND team refined the model and drew conclusions about the most effective ways to increase arts participation.

UNDERSTANDING THE "HOW, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, AND WHY" OF ARTS PARTICIPATION

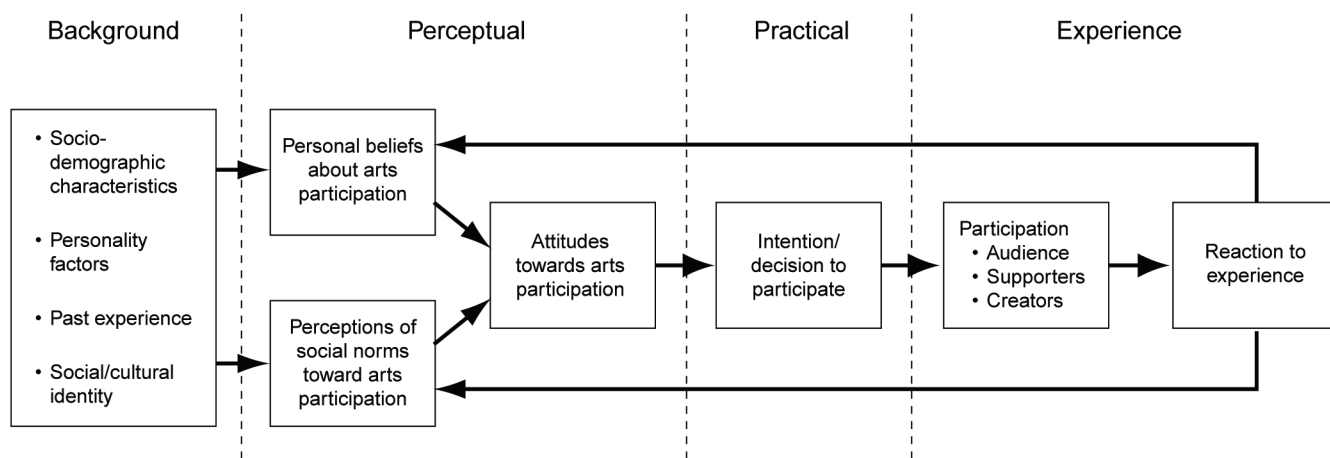
The participation model is an analytic tool that has helped RAND researchers identify and test assumptions about the factors that influence arts participation. It also provided the opportunity to ask questions about how these factors operate, and at what stage in the participation process. The model rests on the premise that an individual's deci-

sion to participate in the arts is a complex one. Typically that decision involves several separate stages or decisions and different factors influence each of these stages.

The model starts with the observation that an individual’s attitudes towards the arts play a critical role in influencing his or her behavior. These background factors include: (1) socioeconomic factors, such as education, income, and occupation; and demographic characteristics, such as age, life-cycle stage, and racial/ethnic background; (2) personality characteristics that are unique to the individual; (3) an individual’s prior experiences, and (4) an individual’s identification with a specific community. The model recognizes individual perceptions are a product of personal beliefs as well as the attitudes of social groups. Taken together, these forces help shape a person’s perceptions about the arts.

Some individuals, because of their backgrounds and attitudes, are disinclined to participate in the arts. Convincing them to change their minds is very difficult without first changing their perceptions of the benefits of the arts. Even people who are favorably predisposed to the arts may be unlikely or unable to participate because of practical obstacles, such as lack of information about upcoming events, time pressures, high cost, or other factors that make it inconvenient. How willing someone is to overcome such practical obstacles depends on individual circumstances and degree of interest in participating in a particular event.

Once an individual decides to participate, several options are available. These range from attending performances to visiting a museum to volunteering or making a donation to a favorite arts organization. The choice an individual



RAND Behavioral Model diagrams the stages in an individual’s decision to participate in the arts.

makes about how to participate will again depend upon individual characteristics and circumstances. It is important to note, however, that people often participate in a variety of ways, particularly as their attitudes towards the arts become increasingly positive.

When people choose to participate in the arts, the nature of that experience can play a critical role in influencing their beliefs and perceptions, and thus the likelihood and manner in which they will participate in the future. As people become more predisposed towards the arts, they are more likely to participate in diverse ways and with increasing frequency. They are also more likely to participate in multiple art forms.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES

This model suggests that strategies aimed at increasing arts participation need to consider carefully the audiences they are trying to target. Strategies aimed at audiences that are not currently predisposed to the arts will need to change individual attitudes toward the arts. Those aimed at individuals who are predisposed but not currently participating will need to consider ways to overcome the practical barriers to participation. Finally, institutional strategies aimed at deepening the involvement of current participants should be targeted at enriching the participation experience and making it “habit forming.” In each case, the actual tactics employed should be designed with the personal and social characteristics of the specific target population in mind.

By breaking down the participation process into a series of distinct behavioral stages, describing the factors that influence each stage, and identifying where specific target populations are likely to fall in terms of specific stages, the model provides considerable leverage for designing engagement strategies.

NEED FOR AN INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

Participation-building efforts are likely to require considerable amounts of an organization's time and other resources – resources that otherwise could be used for arts programming and other artistic activities or for other institutional needs. It is therefore very important that an arts organization take an integrative approach to participation building, that is:

- Begin by considering how the organization's participation-building activities align with its core values and purpose by choosing participation goals that support its purpose.
- Identify clear target populations and base its tactics on good information about those groups.
- Understand what internal and external resources can be committed to building participation.
- Establish a process for feedback and self-evaluation.

As arts organizations tailor strategies and tactics they use to build participation to their specific target populations and institutional contexts, this framework offers a set of guidelines to help institutions approach the task of participation building.

For a library of useful arts-related publications available for free, visit The Wallace Foundation's Knowledge Center (www.wallacefoundation.org) or contact:

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