Bridging the Capacity Gap

Cultural Practitioners' Perspectives on Data

A companion report to "New Data Directions for the Cultural Landscape"

April 22, 2015

Sarah Lee
Slover Linett Audience Research

for the Cultural Data Project

CULTURAL DATA PROJECT

sloverlinett AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Lina Yankelevich, International House Philadelphia
Monica Zimmerman, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

Please note that attendee lists are based on event sign-in sheets and may omit any attendees who did not have the opportunity to sign in. We apologize for any oversights.

Cover photo: Ryoji Ikeda, from his exhibition **data.anatomy [civic]** at Kraftwerk, Berlin.

Lisa Sanders, Neighborhood Project Ministry
Maura Sheffler, TACA, Inc.
Chris Slaughter, Thanks-Giving Foundation
Andy Smith, Texas Instruments
Nicole Stutzman Forbes, Dallas Museum of Art
Cheryl Sutterfield-Jones, Frontiers of Flight Museum
Marla Teyolia, Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University
Brad Todd, The Meadows Foundation

Philadelphia

October 22, 2014 | International House Philadelphia

Panelists:

Lindsay Tucker So, Research and Policy Associate, City of Philadelphia Office of Arts, Culture, and the Creative Economy
Thaddeus Squire, Founder and Managing Director, CultureWorks Greater Philadelphia
Neville Vakharia, Assistant Professor and Research Director, Drexel University, Arts Administration Graduate Program

Attendees:

Stuart Adair, Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance
Eileen Cunniffe, Arts & Business Council of Greater Philadelphia
Michelle Currica, Philadelphia Cultural Fund
Kerry DiGiacomo, Philadelphia Museum of Art
Joyce Drayton, Georgia E. Gregory Interdenominational School Of Music
Morgan Farrow, FringeArts
Lauren Fenimore, International House Philadelphia
Esperanza Flury, WXPN
Jacqui Good, AMLA
Chuck Holdeman, Relache, Inc.
Thora Jacobson, Philadelphia Art Alliance
Jill Katz, Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA)
Glenn Martin, International House Philadelphia
Kelly McFarland, Curtis Institute of Music
Amy Miller, The Curtis Institute of Music
Larry Passmore, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
Gilberto Pereira, Philadelphia Gay Men's Chorus
Abdul Rahim Muhammad, Islamic Cultural Preservation & Information Council / New Africa Center
Doug Roysdon, Mock Turtle Marionette Theater
Sandra Van Ardenne, Hispanic American League of Artists HALA
Amy Wilson, People's Light & Theatre Company

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April 22, 2015

Prepared for
Cultural Data Project

by
Sarah Lee
Slover Linett Audience Research

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Dallas

September 24, 2014 | Communities Foundation of Texas, Mabel Peters Caruth Center

Panelists:

Sarah Cotton Nelson, Chief Philanthropy Officer, Communities Foundation of Texas
Rob Stein, Deputy Director, Dallas Museum of Art
Zannie Voss, Director, National Center for Arts Research at Southern Methodist University

Attendees:

Jac Alder, Theatre Three, Inc.
Maryam Baig, Undermain Theatre
Barbara Berthold, Dallas Goethe Center
LeAnn Binford, Big Thought
Robert Boyer, Irving Chorale
Kirsten Brandt James, Junior Players
Jennifer Bransom, Bransom Working Group
Eric Brewer, Spectrum Financial Group
Greg Brown, Dallas Center for Architecture
Alyssa Chi, The MAC
Beverly Davis, SPARK!
Laura Duty, Carl B. and Florence E. King Foundation
Molly Fiden, The Sixth Floor Museum
David Fisher, City of Dallas, Office of Cultural Affairs
Margaret Fullwood, City of Dallas Office of Cultural Affairs
Farzaneh Ghanbarifard, Dallas Black Dance Theatre
Elizabeth Gunby, Dallas County Medical Society Alliance
Rachel Hull, Dallas Theater Center
Elizabeth Hunt Blanc, Jesuit Dallas Museum
Lisa Kays, SMU CAPE
Katherine Kunze, Crow Family Foundation D.B.A. The Trammell and Margaret Crow Collection of Asian Art
Jean Lamberty, WordSpace
Nicola Longford, The Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza
Stefanie Mabadi, Perot Museum of Nature and Science
Mafe Massengale, Dallas Black Dance Theatre
Tonya McGee, Fortress Academy for Youth Empowerment
Caitlin Miller, Dance Council of North Texas
Dee Mitchell, WordSpace
Michelle Monse, Carl B. and Florence E. King Foundation
Amber Oosterwaal, Greater Dallas Youth Orchestra
Megan Penney, Nasher Sculpture Center
Melissa Prycer, Dallas Heritage Village

Boston

June 23, 2014 | Villa Victoria Center for the Arts

Panelists:

Adrian Budhu, Managing Director, The Theater Offensive
Catherine Peterson, Executive Director, ArtsBoston

Attendees:

Terina Alladin, Boston Ballet
Ryan Auster, Museum of Science
Scott Burn, Arts & Business Council of Greater Boston
Clara Cahill, Museum of Science
Eleanor Cleverly, Sustain Arts
Susan Collings, The Art Connection, Inc.
Daniel Elias, New Art Center in Newton, Inc.
Cathy Emmons, Boston Lyric Opera Company
Karin France, The Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston
Helena Fruscio, The Commonwealth of Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing & Economic Development
Stephanie Grubb, Independent
Julie Hennrikus, StageSource
Cliff Hersey, Gordon IN Boston, Gordon College
Ryan Impagliazzo, ArtsBoston, Inc.
Jeff Kubiatowicz, SpeakEasy Stage Company
Helen L. Shore, Worcester Natural History Society dba EcoTarium
Veronique Le Melle, Boston Center for the Arts, Inc.
Carl Mastandrea, Brookline Arts Center
Caitlin McGrail, Boston Ballet
Quin McKinley, Boston Art Commission, City of Boston
Shawn Meisl, Rose Kennedy Greenway Conservancy
Jo Frances Meyer, Rockport Music
Jonathan Murphy, AS220, Inc.
Anne Norton, Boston Center for the Arts, Inc.
Ramona Ostrowski, ArtsBoston, Inc.
Aaron Peterman, AS220, Inc.
Michele Robichaud, Commonwealth Zoological Corporation d/b/a Zoo New England
Joanna Roche, Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater, Inc.
Sara S. Glidden, The Lyric Stage Company of Boston
Dee Schneidman, New England Foundation for the Arts, Inc.
Lauren Woody, Barr Foundation
Rachel Yurman, Boston Ballet

Executive summary

In the summer of 2013, the Cultural Data Project (CDP) partnered with Slover Linett Audience Research to engage leading researchers in a virtual dialogue about cultural data and its role in supporting the long-term health, sustainability, and effectiveness of the cultural sector. The resulting white paper, *New Data Directions for the Cultural Landscape: Toward a Better-Informed, Stronger Sector*, identified six key challenges that appear to be inhibiting the field from more strategically and effectively engaging in data-informed decision-making practices (see p. 3).

With that report as a starting point, the CDP sought to expand the conversation to include the perspectives of arts practitioners, artists, service organizations, and funding agencies working on the "front lines," by hosting a series of town hall-style meetings in five cities across the country. At these meetings, participants discussed the challenges identified in the *New Data Directions* report, articulated other challenges they're facing, and began to suggest solutions. In this report, we summarize what we heard and learned from approximately 185 cultural practitioners in town halls in Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, Dallas, and Philadelphia. Some highlights include:

- The challenge that resonated most strongly with participants was the underdeveloped capacity for data collection and interpretation within their organizations. Many also cited ways that organizational culture and field-wide values in the arts can undermine the effective use of data, as well as the lack of a clear organizational vision for how to use data in planning and decision-making

- In addition to noting that their organizations' capacity for data collection and interpretation was limited, participants expressed a need for greater support and additional resources to help them with data collection, interpretation, and use. They also said they want to expand their understanding of "data" beyond obvious quantitative measures like attendance.

- Participants described reluctance within their organizations, often among their curatorial and artistic colleagues, to acknowledge the value of data in the institution's work. They also expressed concern that audiences perceive data collection—for instance, requests to fill out surveys—as a nuisance. Some also cited broader cultural challenges within their organizations, including decision-making silos and challenges associated with building institutional will for new processes or ventures.

- Participants emphasized that the lack of a clear organizational vision for how to use data manifests as a kind of paralysis: a sense that they already have lots of data but don't know what to do with it. This challenge is exacerbated when the existing data aren't obviously matched to the decisions that the organization is actually facing. This may reflect an underlying gap between wanting to be a "learning organization" (which most aspire to) and knowing how to use data as a tool for learning (or believing that it can be useful in that way).

- Beyond these specific challenges, participants emphasized that focusing the conversation too narrowly around data itself can obscure a broader challenge within the field: the need to set out a clear vision and articulate shared goals, so staff and trustees have a better idea of how and what kinds of data (and other forms of empirical inquiry) might be useful. That conversation, some felt, is necessary before jumping into data collection.

- These town hall discussions made clear that there is no single, universal set of questions for the cultural sector to which data can provide an answer—and there may never be. There is no one-size-fits-all database or study that can answer the diverse and constantly evolving set of questions that funders, policy-makers, and individual organizations need to ask.

- And finally, we learned that many of the organizational challenges associated with data are symptoms of deeper, persistent challenges within cultural organizations, including siloed operations and tensions between the artistic and business sides of the organization; knowledge management and information dissemination within organizations; concerns about being under-resourced and under-capitalized; and the lack of a strategy for balancing multiple, and sometimes conflicting, missions and priorities.

The town hall participants envisioned four broad categories of solutions:

- building internal expertise in research, evaluation, and data collection;
- addressing specific data collection challenges;
- fostering a culture that values the thoughtful use of data; and
- making the CDP itself more effective for the benefit of the field.

We provide examples of each of these types of solutions in the narrative below.

These conversations suggest an important set of ideas and open questions for stakeholders in the cultural sector to consider. In the conclusion of this report, we summarize these considerations for three types of stakeholders: funders and researchers, arts service organizations, and the leaders of individual cultural organizations.

Temple Schultz, Chicago Park District
Joseph Spilberg, Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education
Syda Taylor, Project Exploration
Susan Webb Rawls, Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago
Chevy Williams, 2nd Story

San Francisco

May 12, 2014 | CounterPulse

Panelists:

Anjee Helstrup-Alvarez, Executive Director, Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americano (MACLA)
Jessica Robinson Love, Former Executive and Artistic Director, CounterPulse
Khan Wong, Senior Program Manager, San Francisco Grants for the Arts

Attendees:

Dale Albright, Theatre Bay Area
Sandie Arnold, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts
Kiley Arroyo, Arroyo Arts
Bonnie Bernhardt, Vallejo Symphony
Thomas Busse, Golden Gate Performing Arts
Diane Evans, Sonoma County Museum Foundation
Lauren Hewitt, Julia Morgan Center for the Arts Inc.
Ian Larue, California Shakespeare Theater
Donna LaVallee, The Lace Museum
Jill Lounibos, San Francisco Ballet
Michelle Lynch Reynolds, Dancers' Group
Spiraleena Mason, 3GirlsTheatre
John McGuirk, The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
Lauren Merker, Los Cenzontles Mexican Arts Center
Rosa Navarrete, Dancers' Group
Steven Payne, East Bay Performing Arts dba Oakland East Bay Symphony
Tavae Samuelu, RYSE Center
Michael Smith, American Indian Film Institute
Charlene Smith, East Bay Center for the Performing Arts
Krista Smith, Frameline Inc.
Gina Snow, SEW Productions Lorraine Hansberry Theatre
Robynn Takayama, San Francisco Arts Commission
Rob Taylor, Bay Area Video Coalition
Marla Teyolia, Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University
Ariel Weintraub, The Oakland Museum of California

Appendix: Town Hall Participants

Chicago

April 22, 2014 | Chicago Cultural Center

Panelists:

Jennifer Novak-Leonard, NORC Research Associate & Research Manager, Cultural Policy Center at the University of Chicago

Arthur Pearson, Director, Chicago Program, Gaylord & Dorothy Donnelley Foundation

Courtney Rowe, Manager of Corporate, Foundation, and Government Relations, Museum of Contemporary Art

Attendees:

Jim Adair, Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts

Tamara Allen, Metrix Maven LLC

Sandra Aponte, The Chicago Community Trust

Jennifer Armstrong, Jennifer A Armstrong

Laura Bowen, World Business Chicago

Chloe Chittick Patton, Slover Linett Audience Research

Kristy Conway, Urban Gateways

Sammie Dortch, Vivian G. Harsh Society

Brian Flannery, IPaintMyMind

Gail Ford, Thodos Dance Chicago

Cate Fox, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Susan Fox, Opera-matic NFP

Mike Griffin, Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art (UIMA)

Kristin Hettich, Alphawood Foundation

Felicia Holman, Honey Pot Performance

Renae Jacob, Ingenuity Incorporated Chicago

Evan La Ruffa, IPaintMyMind

Patricia McNamara, Independent consultant/researcher

Michael McStraw, Giordano Dance Chicago

Agnes Meneses, Alphawood Foundation

Brittany Montgomery, eta Creative Arts Foundation

Heather Nash, Loyola University Museum of Art (LUMA)

Hilary Odom, Chicago Shakespeare Theater

John Olson, Raven Theatre Company

Rose Parisi, Illinois Arts Council Agency

Ginnie Redmond, Raven Theatre Company

Heather Robinson, Beverly Arts Center

Carrie Rosales, Urban Gateways

Victor Salvo, The Legacy Project

Introduction

In the summer of 2013, the Cultural Data Project (CDP) partnered with Slover Linett Audience Research to engage a group of leading researchers from academia and the consulting world in a virtual dialogue about cultural data and its role in supporting the long-term health, sustainability, and effectiveness of the cultural sector. The resulting white paper which was published in December 2013, *New Data Directions for the Cultural Landscape: Toward a Better-Informed, Stronger Sector*, identified six key challenges—three at the system-wide level, three at the organizational level—that appear to be inhibiting the field from more strategically and effectively engaging in data-informed decision-making practices (Figure 1).

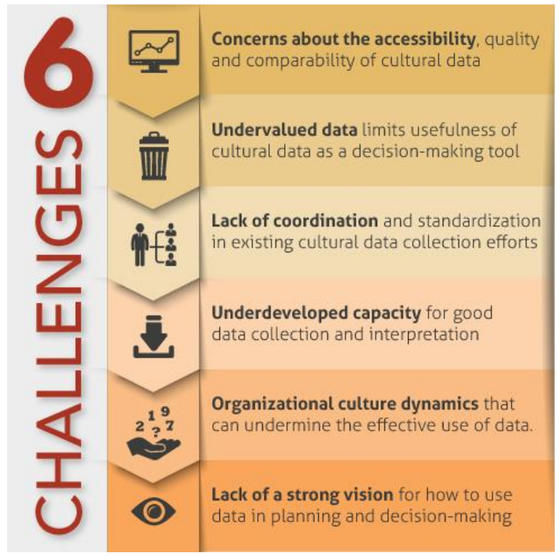

Figure 1. *The six challenges identified in "New Data Directions" (2013)*

New Data Directions was conceived as merely the beginning of a conversation about the role that data play in the arts and culture field. Based as it was on the experiences of a handful of researchers, it necessarily provided only a partial view of how data is or could be used to greater strategic purpose. To expand the conversation to the cultural practitioners, artists, service organizations, and funding agencies working on the "front lines" of the sector, the CDP hosted a series of town hall-style meetings in five cities across the country during the spring and summer of 2014. In gatherings in Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, Dallas, and Philadelphia facilitated by CDP staff, we shared a brief overview of *New Data Directions* along with some context about changes being made by the CDP to enhance its value and impact. At each event, a small panel of local leaders—typically a funder, a service organization leader, and someone from an arts organization—set the context for the participants. (Please see the appendix for a

list of panelists in each city.) We then asked practitioners to work together to expand on the six challenges identified in the report, identify challenges they're facing but which weren't identified in *New Data Directions*, and begin to imagine specific solutions to those challenges. The present report, intended as an amplification of *New Data Directions*, summarizes what we heard and learned from the practitioners in these five communities.

The practitioner perspective on cultural data

In total, approximately 185 people participated in the five town halls, and they reflected the rich diversity of organizations, cultures, and perspectives within the field. They included executive directors and development staff, educators and grants officers, marketing staff and artistic leadership, researchers and board members. Some came from large museums or performing arts organizations, like the Dallas Museum of Art or Boston Ballet. Others came from smaller organizations at the forefront of grassroots, community-engaged work, like Los Cenzontles Mexican Arts Center in San Francisco or Opera-Matic in Chicago. Some represented science- or history-based organizations, like the EcoTarium or the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza. We were also joined by many representatives of service organizations and funders, including the Arts & Business Council of Greater Philadelphia, StageSource, the MacArthur Foundation, and New England Foundation for the Arts. Yet the discussions at each town hall suggested that these varied organizations share much in common, both with respect to the challenges they experience around data and, more importantly, with respect to the broader strategic and financial challenges they face on a variety of fronts—the kinds of challenges that make better use of data important in the first place.

During each town hall, we asked the participants to select which of the six challenges identified in *New Data Directions* they found most resonant in their own experience, or to select into an "other" group if they felt that the most important challenge they were facing was something other than those identified in the report. Far and away, the challenge selected as most resonant was the underdeveloped capacity for data collection and interpretation within organizations (#4), which 46 participants across all five town halls selected. The next-most-often selected challenge was the lack of a strong organizational vision for how to use data in planning and decision-making (#6), which a total of 31 participants chose. However, two other challenges, taken together because of their similarity, were selected by a total of 40 participants, making them about as resonant as the first two: the undervaluing of data within the organization, which limits its usefulness (#2), and organizational culture dynamics that undermine the effective use of data (#5)—both of which emphasize dynamics within the organization that reflect broader field-wide values about data. (Below we discuss challenges #2 and #5 as a single challenge.) The remaining challenges—lack of coordination and standardization in existing cultural data collection efforts, and concerns about the comparability, accessibility, and quality of cultural data—were selected less frequently but still generated rich discussion. Only a handful of people felt that their top challenge was not reflected in *New Data Directions*.

New Directions for the CDP

The Cultural Data Project (CDP) is already taking steps as part of its new strategic direction to address some of the challenges identified by arts and culture practitioners in this report. Through a combination of better technology, streamlined data collection, and new educational resources, our goal is to equip the sector with the knowledge, skills, and tools it needs to put data to use for greater impact.

In late 2015, the CDP will launch its next-generation online data management platform. The new system, to be rolled out in phases over a two-year period, will support and strengthen arts and cultural organizations' capacity to collect, interpret and use data for planning and decision-making. It will do this by:

- Improving the relevancy to arts and cultural organizations through the introduction of a flexible profile tailored to specific organizational disciplines, activities, and scales of operation. Improved relevance of questions is designed to enhance the quality and usefulness of data collected.
- Providing new analytics, visualizations, and tools designed to spark data-informed insights.
- Communicating best practices in data interpretation and financial management.
- Elevating success stories that illustrate how cultural organizations, grantmakers, and others are incorporating and benefiting from data in their daily work

Additionally, the CDP is offering new resources and trainings that build data literacy and facilitate communications in support of the arts, culture and humanities:

- New workshops are helping cultural organizations connect data to stories, for more effective case making with key stakeholders.
- A curriculum, under development, will equip arts leaders with information and tools that foster data-informed learning and management.
- Advocacy CDP, a subscription-based online data portal, is providing arts advocates with customized reports that help make a data-informed case for supportive public policies.

The CDP believes that these efforts—alongside other field-wide initiatives to bridge the data capacity gap—are critical steps toward a healthy, vibrant, and adaptive arts and culture sector.

For leaders of individual cultural organizations:

How can the nonprofit arts and culture leaders better advocate with funders for their organizations' internal research and capacity needs? How can they ensure they have the knowledge and capabilities they and their staffs need to move beyond merely fulfilling funders' requests for data? How can leaders mitigate decision-making silos in their organizations and foster cross-departmental collaboration and information sharing? What steps can they take to make more time for, and engage their staffs in, articulating the pressing questions that they're facing and identifying the information, insights, and resources they need to chart a wise course?

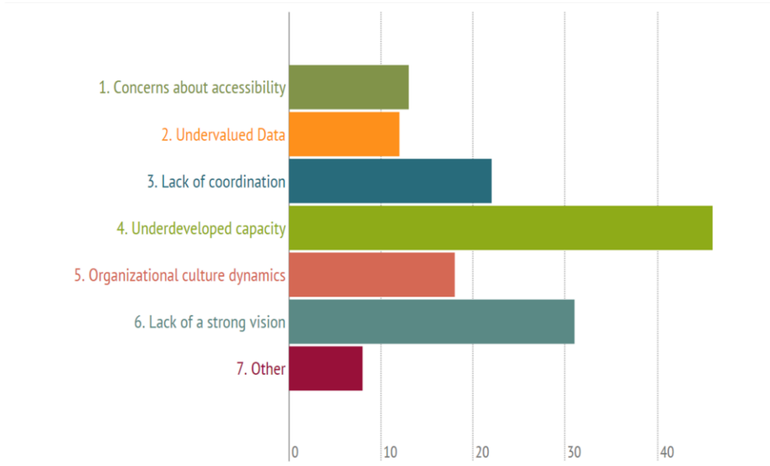

Figure 2. *Number of participants selecting each challenge, across all town halls*

Once each participant had selected a challenge to work on, we divided into groups and asked each group to expand on what resonated with them about that challenge and how it played out in their organizations. Below we summarize the insights and perspectives that emerged from those discussions. Before beginning that summary, we also want to note some broader themes that surfaced in the course of the town halls, both during the initial, context-setting panel discussions and the breakout groups that followed. We hope these observations provide useful context for thinking about cultural data.

The first and perhaps most important of these broader themes is a reminder that data is merely a tool; it presupposes a need or purpose. Conversations about how to make cultural data more meaningful and effective or how to inculcate the values of data-informed decision-making in cultural organizations must really begin with a clear vision for the goals toward which we might want to use data: What do we want to achieve as a field? What do the individual organizations in this field want to be able to do better, and what does "better" mean to those within the organization and in the community? What challenges or decisions are individual practitioners facing, and what are the stakes of those decisions? When we start the conversation with "data," are we guilty of reinforcing the "data first, questions second" mindset, described in *New Data Directions*, that may have limited the sector's effective use of information? Or are we helpfully embracing the idea that exploratory analysis of data—"data mining," as it's often called—can generate important insights that lead to better questions, and even directly to better strategies? Either way, we heard repeated calls to move the conversation about cultural data toward the "ends" of data collection and use—that is, a healthier, more informed, more adaptive field—and to clarify that data is merely a means (and not the only means) to get there. For simplicity's sake, we continue to use the word "data" throughout this report, but we intend it to refer to a mind-set and way of working that encompasses everything from the process of

articulating goals and parameters of inquiry to conceiving, acquiring, and making sense of information, then putting that insight into action. That could include qualitative or quantitative primary data collection as well as analysis of secondary data sources or existing bodies of knowledge, and other forms of empirical assessment and decision-making.

So, what *are* the goals toward which we might be able to use data? What are the questions to which we're seeking answers from data? These town hall discussions made clear that there is no single, universal set of questions for the cultural sector—and there may never be. One town hall panel participant summed up this notion:

> I don't think that there's a one-size-fits-all, unified-field-theory concept of data [in the cultural field]. A lot of the stuff that [organizations like] Sustain Arts and the NEA are [doing] is for a very specific layer of the policy world, to address very legitimate questions. But it doesn't have the same kind of instrumental value to an organization operating on the ground. And that's not a failure of that data; it's because it was built for a different organization asking different questions. Funders ask and have to answer different questions than arts organizations have to answer. We make a fatal mistake in assuming that those two sets of questions are the same. A funder is asking a question about 'how do I distribute this money most responsibly and effectively for a group of organizations?' That's the question they should be asking and the data that supports the answer to that is going to be different from a small organization saying 'how do we grow our programs for next year?'

This lack of a one-size-fits-all solution for cultural data may come as difficult news to some in the field. But the sooner we can acknowledge and accept that there may never be a single dataset, platform, or set of data practices that addresses everyone's questions, the better equipped we will be to identify stakeholder- or organization-specific opportunities to leverage data and other forms of empirical practice to move each player in the field forward.

Finally, much of the dialogue in these five town hall meetings touched on internal challenges that cultural organizations face, challenges which are larger than, but also closely tied to, the ways that they do and do not use data. This may point to several areas in which the field is in need of broader organizational development and capacity building support, which might not only enhance the ways that organizations use data but also have broader benefits in terms of organizational health and functionality. The conversations about how data are currently used allude to deep, persistent organizational silos and tensions between the artistic and "business" sides of cultural organizations; to challenges in the areas of knowledge management ("how do we know what we know?") and information dissemination within organizations; to perennial concerns about being under-resourced and under-capitalized; and to an absence of shared goal-setting or a clear vision for how to balance multiple and sometimes conflicting missions and mandates.

With those broad observations as context, we can now summarize the dialogue across the town halls about each of the challenges identified in *New Data Directions*.

how to reach and be relevant to audiences of the future—including audiences who may not look, demographically or psychographically, like the audiences they are accustomed to reaching; about how to define, achieve, and measure the impact they want to have on their audiences and communities; and about how to foster financial and organizational sustainability in a time of near-constant change.

Fostering a culture of effective research, evaluation, and data practices to answer those questions is not a short-term project, nor one that can be carried out by a single actor or supported through a single resource. This dialogue illuminated a number of specific actions the CDP could take in order to become an even more valued resource to individual organizations, funders, policy-makers, and researchers alike. These include enabling organizations of different sizes and disciplines to customize their data entry and helping organizations make meaning out of the data that they enter. Many of these steps are already underway (see *New Directions for the CDP*, below). But the path forward involves many more stakeholders than the CDP, and the ideas and insights of the participants in these five town hall meetings provide a range of open questions for other cultural stakeholders to consider:

For funders and researchers:

While the funding and research communities play a critical role in supporting research and data collection projects that address field-wide questions, how can they also translate that work into highly actionable insights for individual cultural organizations? Or, in cases where fundamental knowledge-building rather than identifying concrete action steps is the order of the day, how can funders and researchers engage individual cultural organizations in an open dialogue about what a study can and can't be expected to provide? How can funders shift the conversations they have with their grantees about data to prioritize genuine learning over compliance and accountability? (What kind of training or capacity building might foundation program officers need in order to do that?) How can funders, policy-makers, and researchers support the needs identified in these conversations, particularly the need for building various kinds of capacity and the calls for collaborative platforms for knowledge sharing across the sector?

For arts service organizations:

What roles can service organizations play in supporting the capacity-building needs of cultural nonprofits, both at the organizational level (bridging decision-making silos or creating a shared vision) and at the level of data collection and use to address specific needs? How can service organizations help create better systems of knowledge management—not just ticketing or donor databases, but systems that reveal what kinds of practices and programming create the kinds of impact that the organization hopes for? What kinds of shared, easy-to-use resources can they develop or provide, such as data collection toolkits and research training or support?

burden on staff by leveraging a tool that many are already using to capture financial information. Other groups suggested that, in response to the challenges of standardizing data collection across different types of organizations—and particularly the concern that we might trade away the insight most relevant to a particular discipline when we try to make data comparable across disciplines—CDP should move to a more modular approach, providing certain sections that are opt-in and more tailored to specific kinds of organizations (for instance, an opt-in module for museums that captures data about the number of free days offered and the cost of membership.) In a similar vein, another group proposed that CDP could offer more support in running benchmarking reports from its national dataset, particularly with respect to helping organizations filter the data in order to look at their unique peer set.

> "Rather than somebody figuring out which report is accurate, identify one or two reports that get sent to them after they've completed the data [profile]."

Some groups suggested that CDP should continue to evolve to keep pace with the kinds of metrics that cultural organizations are increasingly interested in using to understand their own efficacy: for instance, incorporating more social media metrics into the data profile or building in an impact assessment module. Finally, one group proposed an expansion of CDP's role to become a national clearinghouse for "success stories" of how individual organizations have incorporated data-informed decision making into their daily practice; those participants see CDP as a natural disseminator of concrete models and best practices to advance the role of data in the cultural sector.

Conclusion

As we noted in *New Data Directions*, these town halls—and the field's broader conversation about cultural data—come at a time of profound change within and around the cultural sector. Data, and the inquiry and insight it is often shorthand for, represents an opportunity to grapple with and respond to those changes. So it's no surprise that many arts & culture practitioners are hungry for resources to help them use data more effectively, and eager for shifts in their organizations that would enable them to use data more fully and effectively in decision-making. But we agree with the sentiment expressed by many of the town hall participants: data is simply a set of information points that, in and of themselves, don't guarantee better practice or more successful decision-making. Data need to be marshaled to address well-defined questions, whether those questions are posed by individual nonprofits, cultural funders, or policy-makers. When that is the case, it can sharpen the instincts of practitioners, inspire innovation and creativity, and shine light on new opportunities. While the conversations in these town halls necessarily stopped short of defining the most urgent questions facing the field, it seems clear that many practitioners are asking big, forward-looking questions about

Challenge 1: Concerns about the accessibility, quality, and comparability of cultural data

In their discussions of this challenge, the self-assigned breakout groups in each city expanded on how system-wide concerns about the accessibility, quality, and comparability of cultural data are experienced within individual organizations. They focused first and foremost on how the lack of a centralized "knowledge management" system for the field's cultural data leaves many individual organizations unsure as to what information and resources are already out there. They have a vague sense that datasets and research/evaluation toolkits exist and could be helpful to them—and they're wary of trying to reinvent the wheel to meet their own institution-specific needs—but do not know how to find and use these resources for their own purposes. In particular, organizations want tools that would help them assess their own impact, particularly to obtain high-quality qualitative data on their programming and its value to their audiences and communities. They would also like to become more skilled at contextualizing their own stories (whether those stories are told through data or other means) within the broader data picture at the city, regional, or national level, but they don't know what data sources to use nor how to bridge organization-specific insight with data at higher levels of aggregation.

> "What are the tools that can help assess impact and knowledge of what's already out there, so that we don't have to reinvent the wheel?"

Some groups wrestled with questions about the relative merits of data that enable comparisons across diverse organizations and data that speak to the specific operating needs and challenges of an individual organization. Some wondered how best to make data collected across multiple organizations relevant to their organization, and how to make data collected by their organization meaningful to the field: How do we make data that is collected to be comparable at a field-wide level specific enough to support decision-making within a single organization? How can data collected by a specific organization and for a specific purpose be used to develop a broader understanding of field-wide trends? In fact, the Cultural Data Project and other data and research entities in the field are working on tools to address both sides of this data-relevance challenge, and both types of analysis will continue to play an important role in the field. An aggregate dataset may not answer every question that an individual organization has, but that doesn't mean such data collection can't contribute meaningfully to decision-making within specific organizations. By

> "What data is really going to be helpful to organizations to drive management decision-making, program decision-making? CDP collects this data but ... there's also other data that drives decision-making, in addition to what CDP collects."

the same token, a study tailored to a given cultural organization may not always yield generally applicable recommendations, but that doesn't mean there isn't some level of field-wide insight to be drawn from the work commissioned by individual organizations.

Other participants pointed to definitional questions that make the path toward comparability thorny for individual organizations. For instance, does the focus on arts organizations in much of the conversation preclude history, science, humanities, or other non-arts cultural nonprofits from contributing meaningfully to a broader understanding of the field? Can organizations that provide "programs" be compared to organizations that produce "performances?" And how do we compare organizational performance across nonprofits that may have radically different notions of success? Should we expect a grass-roots organization devoted to community engagement to share performance metrics with a large museum devoted to the collection and preservation of art, history, or science objects?

And finally, some discussed concerns about CDP itself that connect to these challenges. Some organizations feel that their unique operating context makes them feel that CDP (in its current incarnation), and the language it uses, doesn't quite capture what they're all about. Some say they are too big—or too small—to use CDP effectively. Still others simply wish they knew about how to make more effective use of CDP data after they've entered their own data into their profile. And finally, though not specific to CDP, some practitioners wish that there was a platform that supported that sharing of *qualitative* data within the field—a sort of qualitative analog to the CDP and other major quantitatively-oriented databases within the field.

Challenges 2 & 5: **Undervaluing of data limits its usefulness as a decision-making tool / Organizational culture dynamics can undermine the effective use of data**

Across all five town halls, the groups that discussed challenges two and five pointed to the same dynamics. This is not surprising given that we were essentially asking participants to reflect on how system-wide challenges are felt within their organizations.

Echoing points made by the researchers convened for the original *New Data Directions* dialogue, the participants in the town halls pointed to reluctance among curatorial and artistic personnel to see the value in having data about their work. Practitioners on the "business" side (marketing, development, etc.) said they've gotten the message from some of their colleagues on the artistic side, that "what I do can't be counted," which they said leads to an over-reliance on anecdote and opinion rather than objective data, whether qualitative or quantitative. Others detect a deeply embedded tendency

> **"There is fear of the downstream implications of what the data tells us, particularly if an organization has not been accustomed to using data in decision making.... [It] can be kind of threatening ... and what is at the heart of that is the fear of change."**

audience's perspective—for instance, via an award system that would provide incentives for audiences to self-report relevant data, similar to the novel membership program launched by the Dallas Museum of Art in recent years, or an app that would connect audiences to the organizations in their area and enable them to engage in all sorts of transactions from ticket purchasing to game-like ways of connecting with an organization's artistic vision. (They imagined that this app would capture and feed back to organizations detailed information about audience preferences and behaviors, while also facilitating information-sharing across organizations.)

> **"We talked about incentivizing self-reporting by patrons as a way to collect data without having to add extra manpower."**

Other groups focused on ways to minimize the internal burden of collecting or sharing data: for instance, processes that would make data collection and dissemination more automated by leveraging existing tools like Google Docs; or a coordinated system for sharing data within the field to avoid reinventing the wheel for each organization's data collection efforts.

Many participants looked internally, focusing on **solutions that would help foster a culture that values data use**. These solutions emphasized the importance of cross-departmental collaboration: for instance, encouraging more meetings between the artistic side and the financial leadership of the organization to discuss how data is being used to make operational decisions; sessions with an outside expert to discuss organizational vision, strategy, and opportunities for research, evaluation, or data to help advance the organization's work; and developing cross-functional "data task forces" within organizations to ensure that information is disseminated throughout the organization (instead of staying within the department that commissioned the study.) Others focused on how to make the case within their organizations that data collection and research are valuable endeavors: one suggested a field-wide study to assess the impact (on both revenue and other important outcomes) of developing good data collection and data-informed decision-making practices; another suggested more peer-to-peer sharing across organizations about how data is being used. One group suggested that, in order to bring artistic and programming staff into the conversation, data itself could become a subject for artistic inquiry and creation.

> **"Empowering the organization to move away from compliance, but work toward identifying their own priorities. Even building a tool that is specific to them."**

Finally, a number of groups envisioned **solutions to make CDP itself more effective** within the context of the challenges discussed above. For instance, groups in two cities suggested that the CDP interface should be better integrated with QuickBooks in order to reduce the data-input

Practitioner solutions

We asked participants at the town halls to identify a solution to the challenge they'd been discussing. We asked them to work in small groups and consider the specific challenge that their solution addresses; the intended result of their plan, including who it would benefit and what it would accomplish; and the resources necessary to deploy the solution. The solutions they developed fell naturally into four broad categories.

Not surprisingly, given the challenges they had in mind, a number of groups developed **solutions for building internal expertise on research, evaluation, and data collection.** Some envisioned high-touch training for arts and culture professionals or making research experts available to organizations, either through an intensive (and likely funder-supported) residency program where research and data experts would be "embedded" within an organization for a period of months to help establish processes and provide training, or through a service that would match smaller organizations with experts willing to provide *pro bono* training and consultation. Others imagined peer-to-peer training through a program that would match organizations that are just beginning to think about their data collection capacities with those with more advanced capabilities. And one imagined a full-scale data literacy training program that would be designed for senior leadership, board members, and the funding community, and which would be focused on big-picture strategic questions: how to define what you want to be able to *do* as an organization and figure out how data can support that vision; how to ask the right questions; how to put data-generated insight into action. Still other groups imagined the development of centralized resources that organizations could access at their convenience—for instance, a video series that could include short, well-produced segments on data collection how-tos, the practical applications of data, and organizational success stories. One group called for the establishment of best practices for the field in this area and the development of a set of resources that would make data collection easily actionable (for instance, a list of the top 10 data points all organizations should collect and how to use each of them).

> "Having an organization that was doing this successfully talk [with other organizations] about what they were really doing and what . . . they were getting out of it. What was the effect to the board and to the staff?"

> "A video series or any type of public platform that could feature success stories and that could cover a range of practical applications of data."

Other groups began to sketch out specific **solutions to data collection challenges** they face. Some focused on ways to make audience-level data collection more appealing from the

for their artistic colleagues to assume that decision-making can either be informed by data or can be informed by an artistic or curatorial vision—but not both. And finally, some described a reluctance within their organizations—from staff in various departments, not just artistic or curatorial—to engage in data-oriented practices out of a fear that doing so would acknowledge or unduly expose that their organizations are facing challenges (which, ironically, better data analysis could help address.)

Another perspective participants voiced in these breakout groups, and one that did not come up in the original researcher dialogue, was about how the audiences of cultural organizations perceive data collection. Groups in two of the town halls discussed their concerns that audiences don't understand why organizations need to collect data on cultural participation or what value that information brings, so may either not participate in such efforts or may see the data collection process as an unwanted intrusion into the arts experience. Many practitioners are concerned about offending their audience members by asking for information which can be valuable to an organization (and often its funders), that may be deemed sensitive, such as demographic information on income or ethnicity.

The participants embedded these data-specific concerns within the broader context of organizational dynamics that can stymie effective decision-making. Some pointed to silos which exist irrespective of an organization's use of data—but which may limit the way data are used if the department(s) responsible for collecting data were different from the departments responsible for making decisions based on those data. Similarly, some breakout groups talked about the challenges of getting everyone within an organization, particularly a large one, to buy into a shared understanding of the organization's vision and mission: "If we all have different ideas about the mission, we'll all use data in different ways." Others discussed challenges associated with building institutional will to commit to systematic data collection and rigorous processes for informing decision-making with those data. That commitment generally requires authentic buy in at the leadership level and, ideally, a leader who champions those values.

Challenge 3: Lack of coordination and standardization in existing cultural data collection efforts

The participants who chose this third challenge largely confirmed the themes identified and explored in the *New Data Directions* white paper. In particular, they echoed the desire for more sharing of data between organizations within the same discipline (which could help organizations establish useful benchmarks) and across different disciplines within the cultural field.

However, the town hall participants also explored two additional facets of this challenge. One group discussed the need for greater coordination in data collection—and in information sharing more generally—between small organizations and the individual artists working in their domains, who could be more mutually supportive. They also emphasized the need for coordination across departments within the same organization, noting that the lack of

coordination and standardization is a challenge not just at the field level but also at the organizational level. In particular, they discussed internal confusion or lack of clarity about *what* to measure. This is related to the challenges of creating institutional commitment to a shared vision (see Challenges 2 and 5, above).

Challenge 4: Underdeveloped capacity for good data collection and interpretation

The town hall participants who chose Challenge Four felt that it best reflected the on-the-ground realities of their organizations' relationship with data. Across all five cities, they emphasized just how limited their internal capacity is generally, not just with respect to data collection and interpretation. Many, particularly those from smaller organizations, noted the pervasive sense of being strapped—for time, for money, for human resources, for skills—and how this influences so much of their organizations' practices. Those at larger organizations spoke of the ways that practices and habits become institutionalized and how difficult it can be to galvanize change.

> "We just don't have the manpower."

In terms of data-specific capacity, groups in several cities acknowledged their deep need for support and resources to help them know what kind of information they need, how to collect it (or where to find the necessary third-party data), and how to use it. Practitioners seem particularly interested in easy-to-use, accessible, and low-to-no cost resources or toolkits that, for instance, could be accessed online. (Of course, this desire may reflect a hope for exactly the kind of one-size-fits-all solution that may not be realistic.) For instance, some said they lacked resources to help figure out what questions they should ask (on an audience survey, for example) and want relatively "turnkey" tools to make the data collection process easier. Others wanted more conceptual training and support to help them see how to get started and what path or processes to follow. Some participants called for more support focused on CDP, for instance to help them use the CDP database more effectively after they've entered their own data.

> "There is no teaching as to what we need to be collecting and how we should collect it."

Some participants also expressed the desire to expand their own and their organizations' understanding of "data" beyond quantitative measures like attendance. They're interested in being introduced to and learning their way around qualitative data, especially to assess the quality of a performance or program and to monitor and communicate the impact of their work on an individual or the community. At the same time, some worry that funders and policy-makers put less stock in qualitative data than in quantitative measures that can easily be compared across the field. Some face this thinking in their own institutions, as well: "People equate data with Excel."

> "There should be a tool that will enable organizations to analyze qualitative data to help us show our impact."

In addition, one group felt that their organizations need more support in figuring out how to actually put the audience feedback that they're already gathering to effective use.

Challenge 6: Lack of a strong vision for how to use data in planning and decision-making

Last but not least, groups in each city reflected on the lack of internal vision at their organizations, and even of good examples and models from around the field, for how to put data to good use in planning and decision-making. For many, this manifests as a kind of paralysis: a sense that they already have lots of data and/or that there's lots of data out there to be had, but they simply don't know what to do with it or how to take the first step toward making it useful. One group suggested that they would benefit from very specific, case-study examples of how to use data for marketing, programming, or service decisions.

Others emphasized the need for data to be better matched to the decisions they are actually facing. Some described a misalignment between the data available to them through publicly available or aggregate sources (including CDP) and the data they need to address their key organizational questions: Who is our audience? What do they need and want? How do we get them to sample or cross over into other kinds of programming? Of course, this may be less a "misalignment" than a reflection of the reality that the CDP (and centralized resources like it) does not—and cannot—answer all types of questions or meet every important information need. Others described this in terms of *temporal* misalignment: building healthier data practices and processes is a long-term endeavor with minimal short-term benefits; what they really need is help with the myriad immediate decisions they're facing.

> "The data we're collecting isn't helping us with our questions, whether it's determining who our core audience is, what kind of programming we should do, how we should change our funding decisions, or how we're measuring impact."

Others agreed that it can take time for the benefits of investing in various data processes, including the CDP, to be realized—but when they are, organizations can find them transformative: "At first it [the CDP] was a challenge but now that I've done it, I love it! I think it's great, it helps power all this information, and I'm able to see what we need to work on."