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Arts Advocacy Meets Intrinsic Impact Briefing Session

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Presenter: Brad Erickson, Executive Director, Theatre Bay Area
See the [presenter's bio](#) under Friday Morning Briefings.

[Presentation: Arts Advocacy Meets Intrinsic Impact](#)

Facilitator Brad Erickson reviewed recent research on the association of the intrinsic impact of arts experiences with arts policy. He noted that artists and arts administrators have had to be "bean counters" because those to whom they reach out for funding are concerned with numbers and economic impact. But, he added, economic impact isn't the primary motivation for arts participants.

Defining intrinsic impact as the intellectual, social, emotional and empathetic impact of a piece of art on an individual, and referencing the RAND book, [Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts](#), Erickson said intrinsic impact is about an individual's captivation and delight with an arts experience.

How can we bring the intrinsic impact argument into conversations with legislators about public funding for the arts?

The missing link was how to measure these. When renowned research protested that the RAND study asserted that the real value of the arts was ultimately unmeasurable, a Wallace Foundation funder said that if you can describe something, you can measure it. The research team at WolfBrown developed a set of five value clusters (slide 7), with the Imprint of the Arts Experience cluster being the base: if people aren't moved, none of the other things will happen.

Excited by WolfBrown's first foray into this work, Erickson won funding to commission Alan Brown of WolfBrown to devise a study to measure the intrinsic impact of the theatre experience on audiences. They worked together on a pilot study, in which they learned that captivation, aesthetic growth, social bonding, intellectual stimulation and emotional resonance were key impacts. Captivation appears to be most important: How drawn in are you? Are you losing a sense of time? Are you in a kind of flow?

The WolfBrown and Theatre Bay Area team developed the survey methodology, which involved surveying patrons of 58 productions in 18 varied theatres throughout the country. The response rate of nearly 19,000 was unprecedented. Survey results are summed up in [Counting New Beans: Intrinsic Impact and the Value of Art](#).

Notable results of the study included charts of key impact indicators (slides 11, 12), measuring what patrons gained from their arts experiences, as well as word clouds showing degrees of emotions felt after experiencing a performance (slide 13). The study team also learned that the more audience members know about production ahead of time, the deeper the impact. Pre- and postshow talkbacks between patrons and members of the creative team help to engage audiences and improve "stickiness." (See Summary of Results, slide 14.)

The survey team plans to broaden the study with additional organizations, consultancies and fieldwide conversations across the country.

Participant Questions

Did audiences know in advance that they were being surveyed?

Patrons found paper surveys affixed to their theatre seats, and an announcement about the survey was made at the start of each performance. The survey has moved from paper to e-mail, about which patrons are notified the day of the performance.

Has there been a difference in results going from paper to e-mail surveys?

The survey questions are similar, but each theatre can ask its own questions, so that is difficult to measure (no bona fide A-B testing).

How were survey questions worded?

The survey used everyday, straightforward language, including for the emotion-related questions. Question formats included rating on a scale of 1-5, multiple choice, essays and descriptions (artistic directors enjoy reading these).

Did theatres see the research as a way to alter programming? How are theatres using the research?

Once the avant garde [The Cutting Ball Theater](#) learned that audiences were not understanding their work, they've been preparing them by sending e-mails beforehand with things to think about and then holding talkbacks. Other theatres also are having more talkbacks and informal chats. The research has helped the artistic and marketing departments work together to ensure patron expectations are aligned with artistic goals. Some boards find the word clouds helpful.

Connection to Public Policy

Session participants discussed how the research could be used to influence public policy.

Empathy can lead to tolerance, which should be important to legislators. Many legislators might identify with the spiritual (captivation) argument: as with church communities, the arts foster community betterment and public value. Spiritual practice easily connects to artistic practice (singing, meaningful objects, performance).

The research could have an impact if used to influence public will. A change in public will can change policymakers' minds.

The arts can enhance community identity and civic pride through their effect on social bonding. Survey questions can be tailored to determine how well the culture of a place is represented.

Advocacy and Intrinsic Impact

Applying the research to arts advocacy was examined.

It would be helpful to apply the research methodology used for arts experiences to advocacy practices, to reach similar outcomes.

The research could be convincing to arts funders seeking to understand the value of their investment.

One state arts agency, which had "hitched its wagon" to the creative economy argument for years and was temporarily moved to the state's department of economic development, had to fight for an autonomous budget. Now when they speak to legislators, they use statements such as:

- We are not an economic development agency, but when people are involved in the arts, the economy grows.
- We are not an education agency, but when students participate in the arts, they become better citizens.
- The arts are a tool to attain these outcomes.
- The state arts agency is critical to other agencies' success.

If you can figure out how to engage audiences, you should be able to engage legislators. Some state arts agencies invite legislators to performances, to give them the first-hand intrinsic experiences.

A recent NGA session on science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education included large-company CEOs wanting to know how to find creative minds, people with creative skill sets, soft skills. Can measuring these soft skills come from doing this research? Erickson noted that the impacts studied in the

research—intellectual, emotional, social—are experienced by the individual simultaneously. This holistic response to an art experience could speak the CEOs' desire for workers who can perform on multiple levels—creative, analytical, communicative—all at once.

In at least a couple of states, governors use intrinsic arguments to justify funding the arts and cultural agencies.