

EVALUATION LEARNING LAB

Theory of Change

Goal: The goal of the Evaluation Learning Lab (ELL) is to promote evaluation that embodies values and practices congruent with arts and social justice work—equity, inclusion, understanding context, and the role of arts and culture.¹

What needs to change: Currently, evaluation practices for assessing social and aesthetic intentions and outcomes of arts and social justice work are not always adequate to perform relevant, ethical, equitable, and realistic evaluation (assessment) of the work. **Evaluating the social and aesthetic efficacy of arts and social justice work will require disrupting mainstream evaluation practices that undermine or distort the connections among art, culture, and social justice.** It means:

- identifying and adapting evolving assessment practices from social justice and other fields;
- equalizing power relationships;
- ensuring cultural competence in evaluation;
- elevating qualitative evidence and narrative discussion in tandem with meaningful quantitative measures; and
- articulating criteria for artistic as well as civic and social efficacy.

Finally, it also requires that we replace an oversimplified paradigm of success and failure with a more realistic view that acknowledges the iterative and long-term nature of movement building and social transformation and includes incremental as well as cumulative measures of success.

Who is the Lab addressing? Recognizing those who play a role in doing, supporting, and evaluating arts and social justice work, the Lab’s efforts and outputs aim to inform and influence:

Arts Funders

- for whom a social change or social justice frame is new or who want to build confidence in evaluating this work
- who want to sharpen grantmaking guidelines and review criteria to make them relevant to arts and social justice work
- who want to make the case to trustees for social change direction in arts grantmaking and/or build a body of evidence of social outcomes
- who want to work across silos in their organizations and need language, frames, and social outcome evaluation measures
- who want to develop cultural competency in assessing proposals as well as in supporting or conducting evaluation

¹ To guide its efforts in advancing values-based evaluation suited to arts and social justice work, the Lab defines social justice as structural change that increases opportunity for those who are least well off politically, economically, culturally, and socially. Social justice is grounded in the values and ideals of equity, access, and inclusion for all members of society, particularly for poor communities and communities of color that historically and structurally have experienced social inequities. Those who work for social justice push to uncover the underlying causes of inequity and seek systemic change in institutions and policies as well as socially upheld behavioral norms that foster fair treatment and share of benefits. Social justice encourages change to come from those communities that are most affected by social inequity, involving people most affected in working on the problems and decisions. This definition is drawn, in part, from [Social Justice Grantmaking: A Report on Foundation Trends](#) (2005) based on a working group of funders and practitioners convened by the Independent Sector and Foundation Center.

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Social Justice Funders & Other-Sector Partners	(in addition to the arts funder interests above): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who may have had limited exposure to arts/cultural strategies that include creative process and community-based practices • who require evidence of the value-add of art • who are unfamiliar with the role of arts and culture in advancing their sector social goals
Artists & Arts Organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who wish to improve practices and become more effective in contributing to social change by understanding the efficacy of aesthetic choices and civic/social practice • who would benefit from criteria and standards of aesthetic excellence and efficacy that are determined by peers and champions experienced in arts and social change work • who want to uphold, promote and promulgate standards of integrity of arts and social change work on aesthetic and civic terms
Community, Stakeholders, Participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who should be empowered to define aesthetic criteria and social outcomes that are meaningful to them and participate in evaluation and analysis of outcomes • who are unfamiliar with the role of arts and culture in advancing community, civic, and social goals
Private and Public Sector Policy Makers	Foundation and business leaders, elected officials and public administrators <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who set policies and direct programs that determine opportunities and resource allocations for the arts, community and economic development • who are looking to align arts support with the creation of public value, social well-being and positive community and economic development outcomes
Critics, Journalists, Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • who want to become informed or build confidence about how to report on, describe and assess arts and social justice work

Activity: In its design, the Lab brings together arts practitioners, evaluators, organizers, and funders for mutual learning and to enhance their capacity to assess both social and aesthetic outcomes of arts and social change work. The three areas of focus for the Lab are: 1) evaluating social impact; 2) evaluating the artistic/aesthetic dimensions of arts and social justice work; and 3) equalizing power in evaluation.

We see the Lab as a “test kitchen” where we move beyond speculation on often-raised questions to investigate

Example: Lab participants identified issues in grant application and review criteria and processes as well as funder and panel understanding that perpetuate inequity in both access to and receipt of funding. The Lab could make a significant contribution by developing criteria and tools to for more informed and equitable practices in relation to assessing the aesthetic and social outcomes of the work.

ideas, principles, methodologies, and develop frameworks that address some of the obstacles and conditions outlined above and serve the evaluation needs of arts and social change agents, evaluators, and funders. ***Ultimately, the aim of this Lab is to introduce frameworks for evaluating and assessing arts and social***

justice work and to disseminate field generated radical and practical propositions for increasing equity in funding access and review processes.

The Evaluation Learning Lab is a partnership of Animating Democracy, a program of Americans for the Arts, the Arts x Culture x Social Justice Network, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation.

