



The **James Irvine**  
Foundation

## EVALUATION SUMMARY

# The Engagement Revolution

### STRATEGIC ORGANIZATIONAL TRANSFORMATION IN 10 CALIFORNIA ARTS NONPROFITS

At the dawn of the 21st century, the nonprofit arts field was serving an audience that was disproportionately white, wealthy, and aging. To stay relevant to their changing communities and viable in an uncertain future, many arts organizations have been developing “engagement” programs — that is, programming designed to reach more and different people and involve them more actively in how art is made and experienced.

While engagement programs are often episodic or separate from an art organization’s core programming, in late 2013 a group of 10 arts nonprofits across California set out to make engagement central to their work. They aimed to transform their programmatic, organizational, and business models in ways that would improve and sustain their reach and relevance to ethnically diverse or low-income Californians.

The organizations — a mix of museums, theater groups, multidisciplinary arts centers and presenters, and symphony orchestras — received three-year grants, totaling \$8.9 million, as partners in the New California Arts Fund (NCAF) of The James Irvine Foundation.

A 2017 evaluation of these NCAF grantee-partners conducted by Slover Linett Audience Research identified findings and implications summarized in this document.

### NCAF GRANTEE-PARTNERS IN THIS STUDY

- Bowers Museum
- California Shakespeare Theater
- Cornerstone Theater Company
- Ford Theatre Foundation
- Movimiento de Arte y Cultura Latino Americana
- The Music Center/Performing Arts Center of Los Angeles County
- Oakland Museum of California
- Pacific Symphony
- Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History
- Yerba Buena Center for the Arts



**“Engagement is entering into dialogue and conversation with people outside of the organization around mutually shared goals, but without knowing what the result will be. We create something together.” - NCAF Grantee-Partner**



Access complete findings in the evaluation report, as well as related tools, at [irvine.org/arts/learning](http://irvine.org/arts/learning).

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## DRIVING ENGAGEMENT TO THE CORE

Through NCAF, arts nonprofits were challenged to pursue engagement strategies in a deep, sustainable way — internalizing engagement as an institutional value and supporting it with appropriate structures and resources. To depict the evolution of NCAF grantee-partners, evaluators developed a simplified model of four distinct stages organizations may undergo as they “drive engagement to the core.”

These stages are described below in an illustration that also plots the starting point and progress for each of the 10 arts nonprofits involved in this study. From the outset, these grantee-partners were distributed across stages, and almost all moved at least one stage over three years. Naturally, as a group these organizations continue to exist in varying stages, reflecting their respective starting points as well as long-term goals for engagement.

It is important to note that offering effective engagement programming does not require that organizations progress all the way to Stage 4 — though sustaining this programming at a high level may be challenging in Stages 1 and 2.

## MAPPING STATUS AND CHANGE IN NCAF ORGANIZATIONS

### STAGE 1: TESTING THE WATERS

One or more engagement-oriented programs are developed as experiments, separate from core programming

### STAGE 2: BUILDING AND PROTECTING

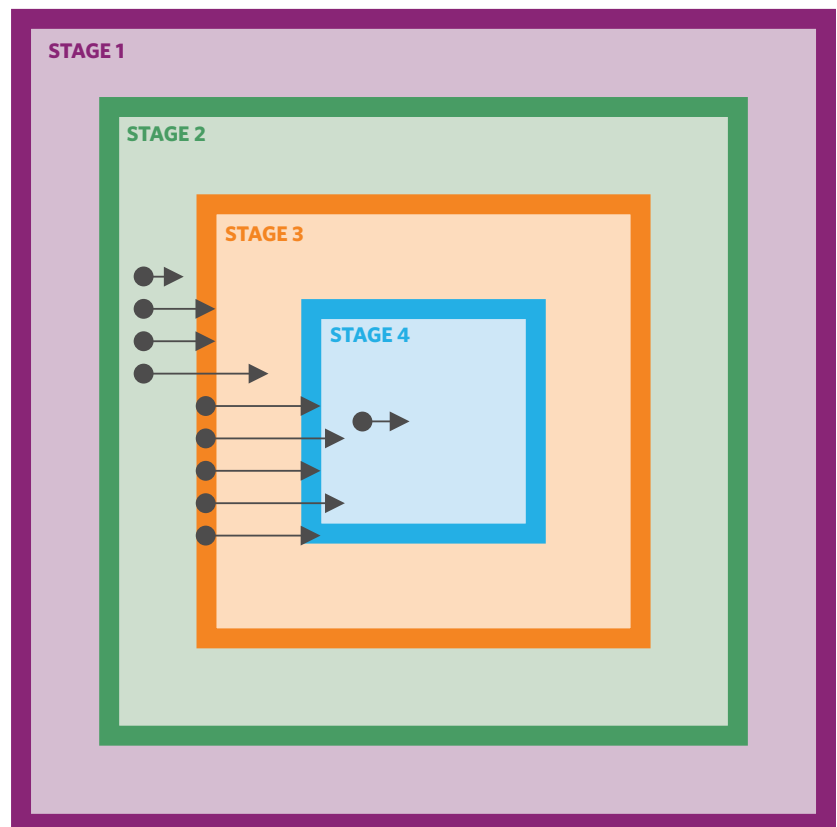
Engagement programming remains distinct but is increasingly valued and supported — though there may be some pockets of resistance to investing in it

### STAGE 3: INTEGRATING ENGAGEMENT

Engagement strategies are viewed as an essential commitment; traditional programming takes on engagement properties

### STAGE 4: EMBRACING ENGAGEMENT AS IDENTITY

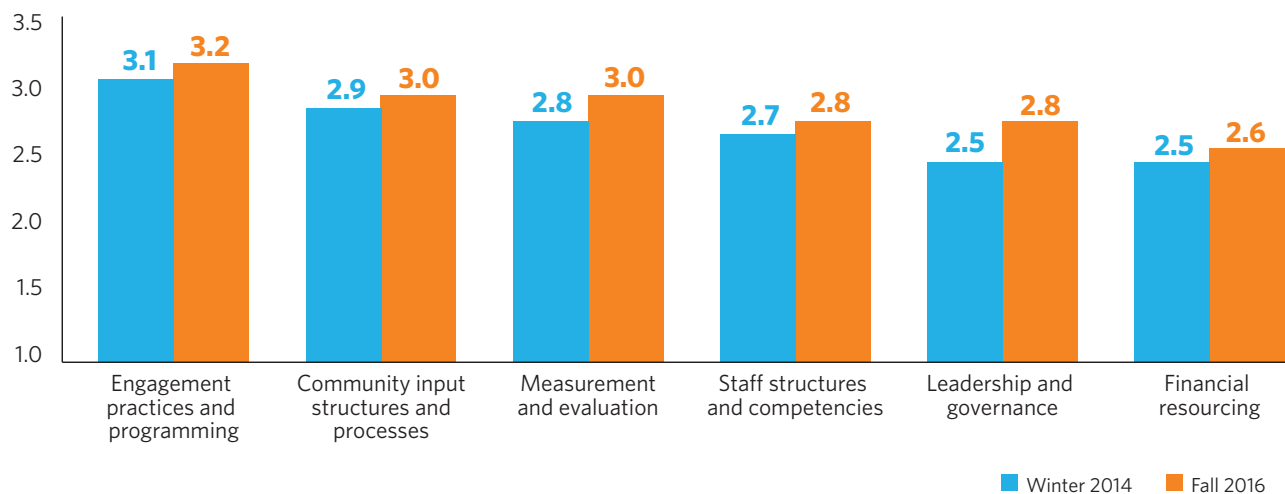
Engagement is a central strategy, with no separation between this strategy and core programming



● → Starting point and movement over three years for each of the 10 arts nonprofits

## GROWING CAPACITY

Grantee-partners rated their organizational capacity for engagement in 26 dimensions, grouped into the six important domains shown below. These ratings took place both at the beginning and toward the end of the grant period, using a four-point scale ranging from low capacity (“1”) to high capacity (“4”). In aggregate, the 10 organizations reported improvements in each domain during the grant period studied, with the *greatest total capacity* in engagement practices and programming, the *greatest progress* in leadership and governance, and the *least capacity and progress* in financial resourcing to support engagement. (Because of the relatively narrow scale used to define each dimension, the evaluators regard a difference of at least 0.2 points to suggest meaningful, but modest, growth.)



## RELEVANT PROGRAM STRATEGIES

NCAF organizations pursued engagement of new audiences as a means to improve their financial stability, stay up to date, be more inclusive, matter more to their communities, and make better art. They employed five primary strategies to increase the relevance of their programming to new audiences:

- Focusing on culturally specific content
- Emphasizing socially or politically relevant content
- Making space for artists of color
- Experimenting with the experience or format that surrounds the content
- Incorporating community voices directly into program development

## CRITICAL TO PROGRESS

NCAF evaluators observed a set of practices critical to progress for organizations that are driving engagement to the core of their identity:

- **Rethinking engagement**, not as a program or type of program, but as a process of building deep relationships from which new programming is generated
- **Partnering with community-based organizations**, prior to developing programs, to guide new approaches
- **Demonstrating leadership commitment** at both the artistic and executive levels, signaling that engagement is a shift that's intended to stick
- **Gaining broad staff participation** in engagement programming and shared ownership of engagement goals, supported by tangible changes in ways of communicating and collaborating across functions

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FIELD

Findings from the experience of NCAF grantee-partners suggest the following implications for those interested in increasing arts engagement:

**Leaders of arts nonprofits** should be explicit and candid in determining whether their organizations are ready to fully embrace engagement as a core strategy rather than as a discrete program activity. If so, they should invest deliberately in the skills and relationships needed to incorporate engagement values and new work practices into their enterprises. They should be willing to let some staff, donors, and audience members who do not share these values move on, and they should be patient — recognizing that this work takes time and inevitably involves missteps along the way.

**Funders of arts nonprofits** should be clear about whether they are supporting a specific program or an entire organization in building capacity to reach new, more diverse audiences. If the latter, they should allocate resources and adapt program guidelines to address this more ambitious aim. Appropriate support can include investments in organizational infrastructure, leadership development, and learning communities that enable progress on engagement — as well as commitment to funder collaborations that can address system-level needs with respect to engagement. It is also helpful to reimagine the funder-grantee relationship to make space for frank conversations about the challenges of this work.



**“To do this kind of deep work, you really have to be able to stop and have conversations, have time to think, time to step back.” - NCAF Grantee-Partner**