



# Reflections On Evaluating Creative Community Development

This project is supported in part by grant awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and The Kresge Foundation.



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## Acknowledgments

Thank you to all those who contributed active, thoughtful engagement to the challenging task of seeking better ways to measure their efforts in communities. Please see the Appendices for the complete listings of these individuals and organizations.

Success Measures and Americans for the Arts are grateful to The Kresge Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts Our Town program for their critical and generous support of this effort.

*All of the evaluation tools discussed in this report are available in the online publication [Success Measures Creative Community Development Evaluation Tools](#).*

December 2020

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### The 2020 Reality

When Success Measures and Americans for the Arts began working together on the project described in this report, we could not have foreseen the swift changes that have resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic and the resurgence of the movement for racial equity and justice.

These ongoing crises have impacted all of us, but most deeply communities of color and low-income communities. Within both the arts and community development there have always been individuals who embrace social justice and whose work has been rooted in values of equity. These practitioners find common ground and common cause in creative community development that is also about equitable community development. More than ever, it is imperative that we understand how change is happening in our communities and ensure that community members have access to data they can use to steer change.



## Abstract

Through a National Endowment for the Arts Our Town Knowledge Building grant and matching support from The Kresge Foundation, Success Measures at NeighborWorks America and Americans for the Arts partnered to deepen input by the arts and culture sector on evaluation tools to measure creative community development and ensure that these tools would be relevant across both community development and the arts sectors. A core component of Success Measures' work in providing evaluation services to nonprofits and philanthropy is a suite of data collection tools used by community development practitioners to gather data to understand how their work contributes to change in communities. This partnership built on earlier work at NeighborWorks America funded by The Kresge Foundation, which created the opportunity for Success Measures to infuse its community development evaluation tools with an arts and culture focus and create new measurement tools on creative community development. It also built on Americans for the Arts' work through its Animating Democracy's Arts and Civic Impact Initiative, which was developed to help practitioners, funders and other stakeholders better understand the social impact of arts-based civic engagement and social change.

As part of this project, Americans for the Arts convened a Learning Circle made up of arts and culture practitioners, in order to solicit substantive input on a set of Success Measures survey and observation tools to include content relevant for arts and culture work. The Learning Circle, co-facilitated by Americans for the Arts and Success Measures, met over a period of five months and made significant contributions to the content and approach of the tools. In addition, a representative from Americans for the Arts participated in a smaller work group that developed two data collection tools on aspects of creative placemaking that employ creative methodologies. This report highlights the high-level learning generated through this partnership between Success Measures and Americans for the Arts. This generative process highlighted key issues in the ongoing body of work exploring creative community development that occurs at the nexus of community development and the arts.

## Introduction

“ Our Creative Tools Working Group, tasked with developing two arts-based tools to evaluate community outcomes, was made up of experts in the arts and in evaluation. As a member of the group, my goal was to ensure the tools would lead to sound evaluation.

One tool we developed used weaving and colored yarn to explore and assess ‘community connectedness.’ The basic idea was for participants to use different colors of yarn to express how they experienced different dimensions of community connectedness such as ‘belonging’ or ‘disconnection.’

As we discussed how to standardize the activity so it could be easily and consistently conducted, I said, ‘We need to make it systematic. What if we assign one color of yarn to represent ‘belonging’ and another to represent ‘disconnection,’ another for ‘attachment’ and another for ...’ That’s when my arts counterpart said, ‘You’re killing the art! We can’t assign what colors people use; we need to let it happen.’

We both laughed—and ultimately developed a method that enabled people to choose which colors represented which dimensions but to do so in a systematic way—allowing both for creative expression and useful analysis. That’s the kind of constant push-pull we experienced throughout our partnership.”

**JESSICA MULCAHY**

Director, Success Measures Philanthropic Evaluation Strategies  
NeighborWorks America

The reflections and insights included in this report are intended to contribute to the ongoing evaluation work being done in the field of creative community development. It captures key learnings from a multi-phased project to embed arts and culture into data collection tools for evaluating community development work.

## Terms Used In This Report

- **Arts and culture practitioners** are artistic or creative practitioners who aim to improve conditions in a particular community or in the world at large. A range of different approaches fall under this umbrella, including those sometimes called art and social justice, artistic activism, community-based art, cultural organizing, participatory art, relational aesthetics, civic practice, and social practice art. (Derived from [Mapping the Landscape of Socially Engaged Artistic Practice, September 2017.](#))
- **Community development practitioners** are people who apply holistic strategies—driven by partnerships between residents and other stakeholders—that work across sectors to address the multiple factors that shape the lives of families and individuals in communities. (Derived from [Community Development Innovation Review, Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, November 2019.](#))
- **Creative community development** incorporates a broad and diverse range of creative activities that aim to engage residents, build community, forge partnerships, beautify public spaces, honor history and culture, revitalize neighborhoods, promote economic growth and lift up voices that often are not heard. Creative community development occurs when residents, community development organizations, artists, culture-bearers and other partners harness the power of culture, art and creativity to collectively catalyze social, physical and economic transformation in their neighborhoods, towns, tribal lands, cities or regions. Many people refer to this work as “creative placemaking.” However, NeighborWorks America’s approach encompasses placemaking and placekeeping, with a goal of creating and preserving communities that offer equitable opportunities for all residents. ([NeighborWorks America Creative Community Development Final Report, April 2018.](#))

## Background: The Success Measures Data Collection Tools

[NeighborWorks America](#) is a congressionally chartered nonpartisan nonprofit that, for more than 40 years, has worked to create places of opportunity for people to live in affordable homes, improve their lives and strengthen their communities. At the foundation of this work, is the NeighborWorks network - nearly 250 leading community-based affordable housing and community development organizations supported through grant funding, technical assistance, training and leadership development and organizational assessment.

[Success Measures](#), an evaluation resource group within NeighborWorks America, helps community-based organizations build capacity to plan and conduct outcome evaluations, and provides evaluation and learning process services to philanthropy, intermediaries and other nonprofit organizations. In all its work, Success Measures employs the principles of participatory and equitable evaluation, and views evaluations as opportunities for engagement at all levels.

Success Measures has developed more than 350 data collection tools, created specifically for community development organizations to conduct evaluations across many areas including health, housing, neighborhood revitalization, community engagement and financial capability. These tools can be tailored to meet the specific needs of individual organizations and communities and can be used to evaluate change at multiple levels: individual, household, neighborhood and community. The tools are available through the Success Measures Data System, a platform that helps organizations plan and conduct evaluations in one centralized location.

In the field of community development, evaluation is divided into three basic categories: performance data, organizational capacity data and outcome data. While all three types of data are important, Success Measures focuses on outcome data, i.e., data that address the quantitative and qualitative changes that occur as a result of a program or strategy. Some Success Measures tools are set up to collect administrative and secondary data, but the majority are built to collect primary data: data from people and data about place.

## The Need: Embedding Arts and Culture into Data Collection

Although the Success Measures tools cover a wide range of topic areas related to community development, they did not specifically address or incorporate creative community development or creative placemaking activities—precisely the type of activities engaged in by a growing number of NeighborWorks organizations and other community development organizations.

In 2017, through funding from The Kresge Foundation to NeighborWorks America, Success Measures initiated a project to address this gap in its evaluation tools and explore how NeighborWorks could best support the growing number of organizations—both in and out of its network—that are engaged in work situated at the nexus of community development and arts and culture. A core component of that exploration was a literature and field review of existing evaluation practices within the area of creative community development. This was coupled with a survey of housing and community development organizations in the NeighborWorks network to identify ways NeighborWorks could support their creative community development needs.

Both the review and survey made clear the difficulty involved in evaluating work done in the blended space of community development and arts and culture. Two things, in particular, were apparent: 1) while some organizations were evaluating their arts and cultural activities, their efforts were typically unique to a specific project or community, and 2) the nature of evaluations conducted was often determined by who provided the funding.

In the survey, organizations also expressed three broad challenges regarding evaluation of creative community development activities:

- Insufficient understanding of the potential value to community development of creativity, cultural expression and artistic practice,
- Difficulty demonstrating and articulating the impact of creative community development, and
- Struggle to identify arts partners and develop shared expectations and frameworks.

In both the review and survey, however, organizations indicated they wanted more support for evaluation work and that they would find it useful to have common outcome measures, tested tools and evaluation capacity building.



## Project Design: Three Tiers of Activity

These challenges and desires motivated Success Measures to further explore how to provide NeighborWorks organizations—as well as broader audiences—with outcome-based tools for measuring and demonstrating the impact of creative community development efforts. To do so, Success Measures identified three tiers of activity to address the need:

### **Tier 1 Activity:**

Take the most frequently used data collection tools, such as those evaluating social connectedness or observing conditions on a block, and integrate arts and culture questions into them so that organizations already using those tools could ask about arts and culture as a part of their ongoing evaluation work.

### **Tier 2 Activity:**

Create additional question sets specific to arts and culture strategies that organizations can add to their ongoing evaluations in order to develop deeper insight into their work.

### **Tier 3 Activity:**

Develop two new tools that use arts-based, creative methods to address outcomes of creative community development work.

### **NeighborWorks Organizations helped shape the initial survey and observation tools.**

“We would like to be able to say that the people who engage in these activities differ in their Community Impact Measurement scores. Our hope is that neighborliness would go up – residents who participate in arts and culture activities are more connected, and also more inclined to be civically engaged.”\*

“I want residents to see a mural and think ‘Oh, Jim made that mural - I met Jim and he is cool!’”

“An increase in pride is certainly positive, but that is not what we are here for – it is not the ultimate goal of our strategies. We are here to build social cohesion, so we can do better than pride.”

\* Refers to a Success Measures evaluation for NeighborWorks America conducted every three years by many NeighborWorks organizations.

In 2018, with additional funding from The Kresge Foundation, Success Measures began the Tier 1 Activity to embed arts and culture into its most frequently used tools, especially those focused on social outcomes (e.g., community connectedness) and physical conditions in communities (e.g., building conditions). This effort engaged a group of housing and community development organizations in the NeighborWorks network to inform the tool revision process. The input of these community-based practitioners was instrumental in framing how best to incorporate the focus on arts and culture into the existing evaluation tools.

After identifying the most frequently used tools, Success Measures then began the Tier 2 Activity of developing new questions and question sets to be added to the tools and soliciting feedback on the revisions from the NeighborWorks organizations that were carrying out creative community development activities. That helpful feedback focused primarily on the content, practicality and usefulness of the tools. (See Appendix A for the list of participating organizations.)

In 2019, with additional funding from the National Endowment for the Arts Our Town program, Success Measures formed an important partnership with Americans for the Arts to build on the formative input provided by housing and community development organizations in the NeighborWorks network, by gathering and incorporating critical input from a broad array of arts and culture stakeholders (Learning Circle) in order to refine and expand the evaluation tools. (See Appendix B for the members of the Learning Circle.) The partnership also engaged Americans for the Arts in the Tier 3 Activity of creating two new tools for evaluating social outcomes using arts-based, creative methods. Additionally, the Creative Tools Working Group (convened by Success Measures to complete the Tier 3 Activity) engaged an artist partner and a qualitative tool development consultant.<sup>1</sup> (See Appendix C for the members of the Creative Tools Working Group.)

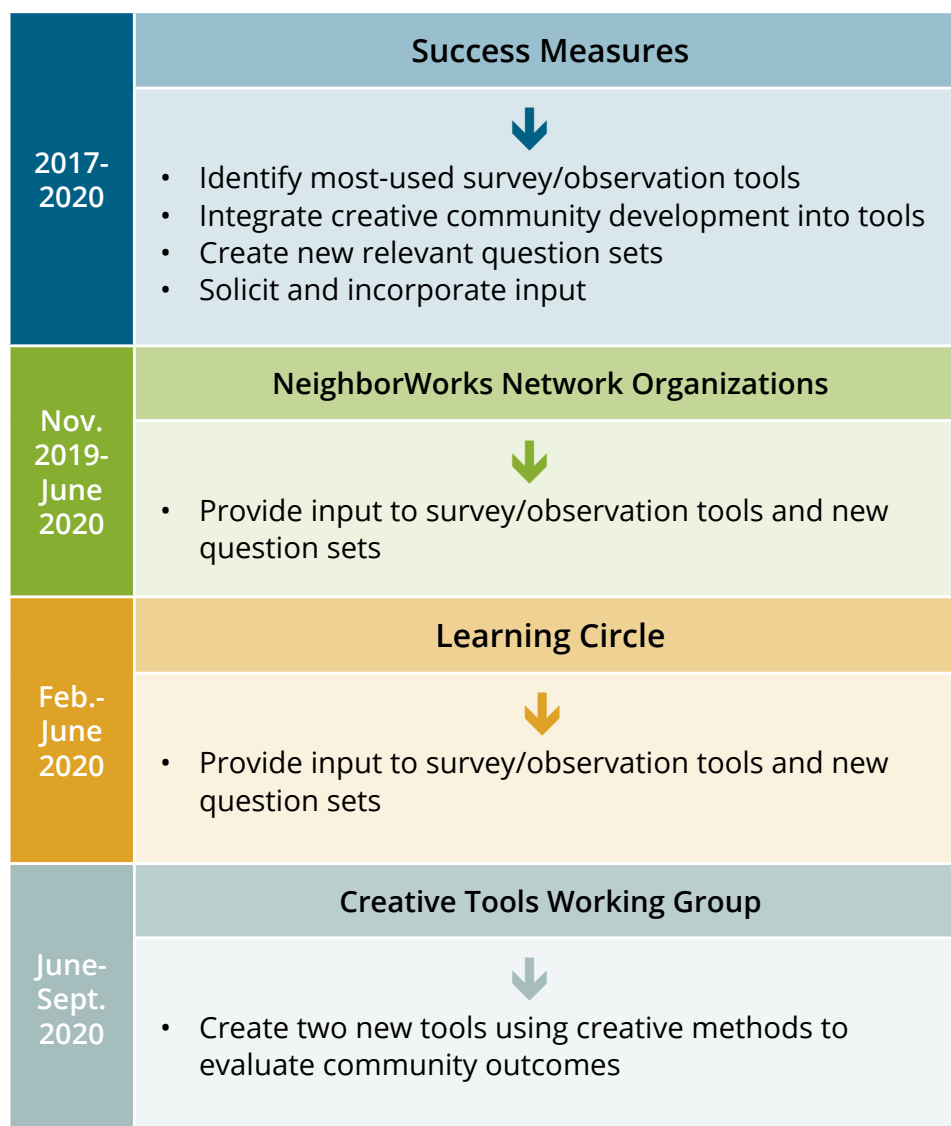
This report covers the activities conducted through the NEA Our Town grant. As a result, while focusing primarily on key learnings from Success Measures' work with Americans for the Arts through the Learning Circle and Creative Tools Working Group in Tiers 2 and 3, it also draws on the earlier formative input provided by NeighborWorks organizations in Tier 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Aki Shibata was the artist partner working through Forecast Public Art and Debra Dahab, Ph.D., Enquire Research, completed the qualitative design of the tools.

The diagram below provides a broad timeline for the key steps in the Success Measures tool refinement and development processes and highlights the sequence of contributions from the community-based organizations and arts and culture organizations.

### Success Measures Tool Development Process



The revised and new evaluation tools created through this process are available in a companion publication, [Success Measures Creative Community Development Evaluation Tools](#).

## Success Measures and Americans for the Arts: The Importance of Partnership

Although there are many shared values between community development practitioners and arts and culture practitioners, the processes and underlying beliefs about how and why change happens can vary dramatically. Therefore, it was essential for Success Measures, whose expertise lies in community development and evaluation, to work with a partner such as Americans for the Arts which is deeply embedded within the arts and culture field, in order to activate a rich interplay of perspectives, knowledge and skills.

[Americans for the Arts](#) is widely known for conducting studies of how arts and cultural nonprofits impact the economy and society. That impact has repeatedly been demonstrated via their [Arts & Economic Prosperity](#) studies, as well as [Animating Democracy's Arts and Civic Impact Initiative](#), which was developed to help practitioners, funders and other stakeholders better understand the social impact of arts-based civic engagement and social change. Americans for the Arts' tools are available [online](#) and via publications including the [Continuum of Impact Guide](#). Most recently, Americans for the Arts produced the [Arts + Social Impact Explorer](#), an online primer that brings together top-line research, sample projects, core research papers and service/partner organizations from more than 25 different sectors in an effort to increase the visibility of the arts' far-reaching impact.

Through their partnership, Americans for the Arts and Success Measures were able to explore and share new ways of evaluating creative community development, while simultaneously ensuring that the project fit within the culture of how arts groups interact and share knowledge. This essential exchange was made possible thanks to the Learning Circle, a working group of experienced individuals from the arts.

### Forming the Learning Circle

Through a combination of open and targeted recruitment, Americans for the Arts brought together 36 local arts and culture practitioners, researchers and evaluators from around the country to form the Learning Circle. Members included local and state arts agency leaders, public art managers, city and regional planners and designers, economic and downtown development staff and artists, as well as specialists in youth development, community engagement, arts planning and evaluation. (See Appendix B.)

Established from the start as a remote engagement platform using Americans for the Arts' expertise in engaging online learners, the Learning Circle enabled members to participate in live Zoom sessions and, when they couldn't attend live, to view recordings of the sessions. Members were encouraged to participate via the Zoom chat box and to submit comments and questions between sessions via Google Drive. The use of these and other online tools to facilitate asynchronous engagement was essential to maintaining ongoing participation and ensuring feedback on the tools.

The Learning Circle enabled open conversation, constructive critique and thoughtful discussion that raised important questions. It also encouraged members to listen intently and intentionally to each other, building a bridge between their worlds while navigating different perspectives. For example, how arts and cultural work happens, what the landscape is like for arts and culture practitioners and what their interests and needs are all were new to community development practitioners and evaluators. By the same token, arts and culture practitioners began to see how a set of customizable and standardized tools could work at the field level and that each instance of evaluation did not require the creation of a unique evaluation tool.

Both groups embraced the beneficial give-and-take of partnership as they identified unique aspects of their fields and observed commonalities—as well as disconnects—in an effort to jointly develop common evaluation tools. Most often, it was in the development and exploration of the tools where the two differing perspectives came together in ways that benefited both.

## Shaping the Measurement Tools

### Meeting the Learning Circle: Initial Observations

The benefit of the Success Measures/Americans for the Arts partnership, as well as testament to the value of establishing the Learning Circle, was realized early in the process. Even before the very first session with the Learning Circle group, members were asked to complete a brief intake survey that included questions about:

- How they were deploying arts and culture within community development aims.
- Specific interests or challenges in assessing their work.
- Assessment and evaluation methods and tools they have used in the past.



Responses to that intake survey offered a rich sampling of the interests and challenges of arts and cultural practitioners—as well as their level of familiarity with standards of evaluation—and proved to be good predictors of issues that later would be raised in discussions about the tools and the topic of creative community development more generally.

As the housing and community development organizations had in earlier stages of the project, Learning Circle members brought a broad and valuable range of interests and experiences to the project. They also expressed a number of concerns and challenges in assessing their work.

One such concern was whether small agencies with limited staff and evaluation training could design and implement effective evaluations. Learning Circle members noted that “the practice of evaluating community-based artwork requires a highly specialized skill set” and asked:

- “How do you develop effective/compelling tools to share with our volunteer-run community groups that aren’t overwhelming?”
- “How can capacity for this work be built within communities so that evaluation is not always coming from the outside in?”

## Learning Circle members brought a broad range of interests and experiences.

“Public art that is accessible to all and part of community experiences is very important to me and part of my company’s core values.”

“I’m working to establish a statewide network of makerspaces.”

“Placemaking and community development are the vehicles by which we are working towards most of our community outcomes.”

“I run a small-town creative placemaking organization that is data-informed and always seeking out stronger metrics.”

“We are currently working with a consultant on developing an arts and culture plan for our downtown core.”

“We are a social-practice, site-specific theatre company that uses our script development process to engage community.”

“Our mission is to elevate Black artists and empower Black communities. Every step of our work is essentially community development.”

Given these initial questions, Success Measures was able to offer information about ways that organizations can build their capacity to conduct more effective evaluations in order to address the interests of Learning Circle members.

Learning Circle members also asked how to enhance the validity of their assessments; for example, establishing outcome correlations for a creative strategy where “numerous other partners, departments and agencies offer services and affect community outcomes.” Members also cited the challenge of getting multiple stakeholders “on the same page” when it comes to prioritizing outcomes.

When asked on the intake survey if they had created any methods or tools for evaluation, Learning Circle members (with the exception of the professional arts-evaluators in the group) indicated some experimentation, but little established practice or systems. More often, they described program evaluation and/or methods for assessing audience demographics and experience, rather than outcome evaluations.

Over the course of the subsequent Learning Circle sessions, it would become clear that while individuals had experience doing required evaluation, they weren’t necessarily comfortable with broad or more formal evaluation. Often, this discomfort or unfamiliarity were at the heart of Learning Circle members’ questions. For example, although the scope and intent of the Learning Circle sessions was to review those Success Measures tools which had been updated with an arts-and-culture focus, many Learning Circle members also wanted to discuss a broader framework for understanding how arts and culture impact individuals and communities. Other questions and comments dealt with fundamental evaluation design.

### **Learning Circle members identified broad challenges in assessing their work.**

“*I sometimes struggle with the idea that art appreciation requires a very exclusive, trained eye.*”

“*Carving out the time to assess...*”

“*We’re able to easily compile the number of participants that attend but haven’t identified an easy way to obtain participant feedback.*”

“*Coming up with the right questions to ask, while also keeping them easy to answer...is also a challenge.*”

“*I would like to see a measure of the effectiveness or engagement of the public with the art after installation.*”

“*We have a very small staff that is stretched very thin...*”



Arts and culture practitioners also focused on understanding the impact of investments made in creative community development efforts. They wanted to find ways to measure progress of those efforts and to tell the story of the impact. They expressed a need for a broader framework that linked particular strategies to their intended outcomes so they could develop common measures for those outcomes. These include, for example, wanting to better understand “the impact of creative placemaking on increasing capacity to maintain inclusive creative engagement and expand civic participation” and assessing “how large projects in very public spaces contribute to a sense of community.” While not able to be addressed in the scope of this Learning Circle, it was clear that members were ready to engage in that broader conversation and to help build out that framework.

At other times, however, questions arose about how the stages of the project flowed due to funding availability: The tools presented to the Learning Circle had been developed in the early stages of Success Measures’ work, prior to the availability of funding to form the Learning Circle. This meant that Learning Circle members joined this project when it was already in progress; in this case, after Success Measures had already completed Tier 1 activities such as identifying the most frequently used tools, creating new question sets, receiving initial feedback from NeighborWorks organizations and completing the initial steps of prioritizing evaluation goals, selecting methods and drafting tools.

As a result, some Learning Circle members’ questions regarding the steps of creating data collection tools, such as how to formulate good questions, the pros and cons of collecting and using narrative or qualitative data or exploring methods beyond surveys such as ethnographic approaches or employing artist-led assessment methods, could be addressed only at a high level during the time available. One outcome of this work may be that, moving forward, Americans for the Arts explores ways of addressing these types of questions through its ongoing peer exchange and field education work including webinars and sessions at regularly scheduled conferences and convenings.

The Learning Circle began with some level-setting to balance the broad range of needs members initially expressed with the possibilities presented by the tools under discussion; for example, the difference between tools that measure the impact of art and arts-based tools that measure social impact. While the group expressed a desire for both, it was important to continue to frame this project as the latter.

A number of other themes emerged in the first session:

- Can the stated objectives of public art projects and strategies be used to form evaluation questions?
- How can we balance the needs of a community development partner and a local arts agency when the evaluation is done by the community development partner?
- Does evaluation differ depending upon what the art project is? For example, a relatively permanent physical work like public sculpture vs. something temporary and performative or visual? What degree of participation do community members have in designing, creating and presenting the artwork?
- What about longitude? Multipronged strategies? If impact is cumulative rather than immediate, how do the questions account for that? What if different creative development strategies are intended to work together to effect a change?

These initial comments and concerns showed the group's strong appetite for creative evaluation tools and methods, as well as its desire for broader evaluation capacity. These initial comments and concerns also highlighted the challenges and synergies at the intersection of community development and arts and cultural practice.

## The Learning Circle Sessions: Central Themes

From February through June 2020, the Learning Circle convened five 75-minute live and recorded online sessions via Zoom, supported by between-session engagement via Google Drive. Each session featured lively and high-quality exchanges, with at least two-thirds of the Learning Circle members participating in each. Highlights from the sessions are described below:

**Session 1:** Learning Circle members were introduced to the project's goals and how Success Measures works with community development organizations to plan, design and implement outcome evaluations. Success Measures also shared examples of how organizations can select from a menu of tested data collection tools and then build evaluation capacity to measure a wide range of outcomes.

**Session 2:** This session explored Success Measures tools focused on physical improvements and observations of places to understand how changes to place connect to creative community development outcomes.

**Session 3:** This session focused on two Success Measures survey tools that can be used to better understand the social outcomes of creative community development efforts.

**Session 4:** The Learning Circle discussed two Success Measures social outcome tools.

**Session 5:** The final session was an opportunity for Learning Circle members to share updates on evaluation projects, for the Success Measures/ Americans for the Arts team to thank members and for all to reflect on themes heard in the previous sessions.

Following the final Learning Circle session, a separate Creative Tools Working Group was formed, which was tasked with using the insights from the Learning Circle to develop two new tools that would employ arts-based, creative methods to address outcomes of creative community development work.

Over the course of the Learning Circle sessions, three central themes emerged; they are discussed in detail following these summary bullets:

- **Shared Values.** Acknowledging the shared values and interests that bring community development practitioners and arts and culture practitioners to their work provides an entry point for finding common areas to amplify through outcome evaluation.
- **Language and Perception.** A collective understanding of the terms and language within both fields enables the building of a shared lexicon for working together and doing so more effectively in communities.
- **Scope and Scale.** A deeper grasp of core evaluation concepts creates understanding and a platform for putting into practice how arts and culture can be infused into traditional evaluation methods and how communities can be engaged in ways that are in keeping with shared values and intended outcomes at individual, neighborhood and community levels.

### **Theme: Shared Values**

The work of arts and culture practitioners is often tied to positive economic, physical and social outcomes, the very cornerstones of community development efforts and the objects of evaluation. As evidenced by the range of arts and culture practitioners joining the Learning Circle—from artists to city planners to academics and independent consultants—the aims of community-based arts practices very often intersect with community development aims.



Assessment and evaluation practices in both community development and community-based arts practices are likewise fueled by two similar motivations:

1. to understand the outcomes of strategies and investments for community members and communities in order to improve their work, and
2. to report to others, including funders and other stakeholders, the value and impact of their work.

Over the four-month course of the Learning Circle sessions, it became clear that there were a number of values underlying the notion of evaluation that were shared by both arts and culture practitioners and community development practitioners. In fact, the two groups share a number of common values upon which to build continued partnerships.

**Value: Participatory and resident-based engagement.** Learning Circle discussions revealed how both arts and culture practitioners and community development practitioners frequently come to their work with a set of values regarding who should participate in the work and how that work should be done. Both groups are deeply rooted in engaging community voices and establishing trust. Both place individuals who live and work in a particular community—those closest to the community's history, dynamics and needs—at the center of programs and strategies.

This is especially true in arts and culture work that aims to drive social outcomes, whether that work is initiated by a community development organization or by arts and cultural practitioners.

**Learning Circle members emphasized the importance of community and artist engagement.**

“*Seeing advocacy in how people attend and participate in places and events – getting residents to see themselves in these events... that the events are for them, not for other people. All of this is very important.*”

*“How are community members and artists involved in the evaluation planning period?”*

*“I am very interested in knowing about broader engagement in the community as a result of our collective work.”*



Some examples illustrate this point:

- Dwelling Place, a community-based housing organization providing a range of affordable housing and neighborhood revitalization programs in Grand Rapids, Mich., held a [contest for youth in the neighborhood](#) to create art depicting what home meant to them. This activity was to promote community connectedness amid the isolation brought on by COVID-19.
- Another community-based organization, Community Housing of Wyandotte County in Kansas City, Kan., that has an active creative community development initiative, facilitated the creation of CARS, [Community Alley Renovation](#), a group of volunteer youth artists who painted murals in key areas to help residents take pride in and ownership of their community.
- Learning Circle member Annis Sengupta, Assistant Director of Arts and Culture at Metropolitan Area Planning Council in Boston, Mass., oversaw the [Everett Earthworks](#) project which created a new space for the community to use to grow food and to celebrate artistic expression in hope of promoting community unity.
- Learning Circle member Holly Whisman of the Arts & Science Council (ASC) in Charlotte, N.C., described [Culture Blocks](#) which invites residents to meet over meals to identify and prioritize the kind of art, science, history and heritage program and participation opportunities they want to have in their own neighborhoods. ASC then works to bring such opportunities to relevant community spaces to increase access and reduce transportation and parking barriers to cultural participation. This creates community ownership.

Because arts and cultural work is co-designed in the spirit of “working with” not “working for” stakeholders, Learning Circle members valued Success Measures’ focus on participatory evaluation that explicitly calls for resident engagement in the process. Arts and culture practitioners also appreciated the engagement of residents in the design of the evaluation methods, language and tools, and expressed their shared concern for cultural sensitivity and relevance.

**Value: Evaluation that benefits stakeholders, especially community members.**

Beyond ensuring participatory and resident-based engagement, Learning Circle members felt strongly that any evaluation should lead to direct benefit to communities—a value that is shared by many community development evaluators as well.

Because evaluation requires a significant investment of resources—both financial and human—to plan, conduct, analyze and share insights, there was a clear sentiment among members that if and when evaluation is conducted, it should always result in benefit to people in a community most particularly, and to stakeholders including municipal governments, funders, business owners and artists. Since Learning Circle members view much of their work through an equity and social justice lens, “people in a community” in most cases refers specifically to low-income residents, communities of color, immigrants in underinvested communities and others at risk of being left behind.

Members of the Learning Circle shared their desire to find ways to conduct evaluation more effectively and engage people more meaningfully. They wanted to understand outcomes more clearly and illuminate if and how people were motivated to take any action. This desire also stemmed from members’ awareness of—and concern for—gentrification in their communities and the need to ensure that community members are both centered in evaluation and guiding any actions resulting from it.

### **Theme: Language and Perception**

While Learning Circle members shared much in common regarding the values undergirding evaluation, their discussions revealed that it often can be difficult to agree on the best language to capture evaluation data. Learning Circle discussions also made it clear that in addition to embedding arts and culture into evaluation, Success Measures tools must also use language and include perspectives that reflect broad yet nuanced definitions of art and cultural traditions and practices. This learning is important to consider when communicating with each other and to broader audiences.

#### **Learning Circle members discussed impact of specific language.**

“ I think that these words can mean different things in different contexts. ‘Program’ is something that is ongoing, regardless of content, and has frequency. An ‘event’ feels discrete.”

“Also the difference between a ‘project’ and a ‘program’: For some arts organizations, there might be a difference there—a project might have some frequency and happen over time but isn’t indefinite, while a program might have a product (producing a mural together).”

**Communicating with each other.** The terms that community development practitioners use to describe evaluation data often had multiple—and sometimes contested and complex—connotations for arts and culture practitioners in the Learning Circle. “Event,” “art/artist” and “culture” are three such terms that were used frequently in the evaluation tools.

For instance, community development practitioners use “event” broadly to mean “a thing that happened,” whether a town hall forum, a potluck or the demolition of a building. On the other hand, arts and culture practitioners in the Learning Circle, use “event” to refer to a very specific type of planned experience such as a performance, festival, street party or concert. The word’s use in evaluation tools created confusion in Learning Circle discussions.

The general uses of “art/artist” and “culture” also proved problematic for some Learning Circle members as the words called up nuanced discussions happening in the field regarding implications of who or what is included—or, perhaps more importantly, excluded—when those terms are used.

A part of arts and culture practitioners’ work involves pushing the boundaries of what people think of as art and as cultural assets. Learning Circle members expressed recognition of and desire for community members to embrace many things in their lives as cultural assets and as art. But members cautioned that when the terms “art/artist” and “culture” are used broadly—without context—they can be taken to mean “capital-A” institutionalized art and “professional” artists, and “capital-C” high-status culture. Without context and specificity, general use of the terms may imply exclusivity at a time when practitioners are aiming for the exact opposite.

### From the Zoom chat box

#### What would you consider “art?”



*If it was designed or made by an artist, then it counts.”*

*“If it’s a design feature, it’s not considered art—murals, mosaic, sculpture, they fit.”*

*“The average person doesn’t have the definition of art that we have, and we may be doing things that they don’t understand as art.”*

*“If you don’t define ‘art,’ people self-define it as ‘not the things I like/do/am part of.’”*

*“Sometimes people are standing in front of public art but don’t know it—so it’s less ‘this is the art piece’ and more ‘how do you feel now different than how you felt before this was here.’”*



Learning Circle members asked that the evaluation tools reflect an expanded notion of arts and culture. In response, where appropriate, specific examples of what is meant by “art / artist,” “culture” or “event,” were added and used consistently within any given tool.

Another term that needed to be addressed was “participation,” which the original tools used in a general sense to mean “attending,” as in participating in a festival or other event. The Learning Circle members explained that for many arts and culture practitioners, “participation” includes much more than “attending.” It also includes artist-led co-design and production of creative projects, with community members and stakeholders playing many contributing roles. The creative strategy is to activate or facilitate community engagement in creative work. This can mean there are concentric or intersecting circles of participation from the core group working directly with the artists, to the residents whose stories are collected and reflected in the artwork, to the volunteers who help make related activities and events happen, to the resident family that uses the space, attends the event, etc.

**Communicating to broader audiences.** In any field, finding specific terminology that those in the field can agree upon—in this case, a term such as “creative community development”—is both a necessity and a challenge. It is necessary to ensure a shared understanding when speaking to one other; it is a challenge when trying to communicate with people outside the field. As one Learning Circle member put it, “Who in the world uses “creative community development” or “creative expression” on a day-to-day basis?”

This presented a challenge in developing the evaluation tools, as Learning Circle members recognized that without clear communication of ideas and concepts it would be difficult to accurately assess and evaluate activities and outcomes.

However, Learning Circle members, by working together, effectively addressed the most potentially confusing language, finding common terms to communicate themes and, to some extent, unpack terms used to describe the conditions in communities. To do this, the revised tools avoid all field practitioner terms such as “creative placemaking” and “creative community development.” Instead, they have been replaced with examples of the types of projects and strategies that fall under those umbrellas so that the individual completing the survey can concretely understand what is intended. This made for longer questions and descriptions, but the group felt that longer questions were better than using jargon.

**Incorporating a broader spectrum of perspectives.** Throughout the process, Learning Circle members noted that while the questions in the tools touched on aspects of the



social outcomes they were interested in, the questions did not fully allow responses that would help arts and culture practitioners understand what they needed to know. Moreover, they identified additional stakeholder groups who would need to be engaged to understand the full range of outcomes such as local businesses and people representing different sectors including education and public safety.

For example, in a question related to understanding how community members felt about an arts event, existing response categories were primarily limited to accessibility, participation, attendance and overall experience. The Learning Circle members explained that it was important that there be more response categories in order to allow for broader viewpoints and to allow for additional event goals including entertainment value, cultural representation, enjoyment, and inter- and cross-cultural education and experiences. Adding these response categories increases the value of the evaluation tools for arts and culture practitioners as the tools provide them with important information to use in planning for future events.

Additionally, Learning Circle members shared that a core value for the majority of arts and cultural work is to spur action. Based on this, questions and response categories were added that went beyond the experience of the arts and cultural work and asked, based on that experience, what action(s) the respondent has been inspired to take. Learning Circle members emphasized the value of knowing whether an event sparked another community activity, encouraged more volunteerism or led to more events.

Success Measures tools typically approach survey questions from an asset frame, which facilitates conversation and reduces potential respondent stress caused by negatively framed questions. While Learning Circle members appreciated this, they emphasized that some residents in their communities had deep concerns about possible gentrification stemming from an increase in arts and cultural aspects of place—and that both means and space were needed to elicit and explore those concerns.

As a result of this discussion, Learning Circle members helped generate a series of questions that explored “disconnectedness” and “disassociation” for community members as arts programming becomes more prevalent. These questions give respondents a way to share which aspects of the arts and cultural work are not working for them, as well as concerns about the future direction of the community.

The expansion of these aspects and themes addressed in the tools was a significant and important Learning Circle contribution and a clear illustration of the importance of partnering across sectors to create evaluation tools.

## Theme: Scope and Scale

One of the underlying assumptions among Learning Circle members was that the needs and interests of community development practitioners were fundamentally different from their own.

In the case of scope and scale, for example, Learning Circle members believed that community development was primarily concerned with individual-level change. In truth, both community development practitioners and arts and culture practitioners are interested in understanding changes in individuals (such as changes in behavior), as well as changes in neighborhoods and communities (such as increased community voice and improved community conditions).

This led to a series of conversations that addressed those assumptions. Over the course of the project, it became clear that a deeper discussion was needed about different types of evaluation, particularly those that collect and use individual-level data vs. community-level data, and how the types of evaluation work together. To promote a shared understanding of these issues, future arts and community development cross-sector processes would benefit by providing more background on core evaluative assumptions such as what can be measured and how, what a program evaluation looks like compared to neighborhood-level or strategy-level evaluation, and how the level of evaluation impacts methodology.

### Learning Circle members discussed uses of data.

“I’m not sure it’s just about valuing different kinds of data, but also about valuing different kinds of outcomes: community building, leadership development, building power, quality engagement. I think both the arts and community development fields can grow in developing common indicators and methodologies for measuring those kinds of supposedly squishy outcomes.”

“I come at this from a different perspective—and provide an app to increase engagement with public art and spaces. Although not comprehensive, it does gather stats on usage: how many times did someone access the info for this location vs. that ... did they press ‘play’ to listen to the provided audio ... how long did they spend on ... where were they... This has proven useful for many of the arts administrators and business improvement districts with whom I work.”

## Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemic struck during the course of this work, both Americans for the Arts and Success Measures wondered if the Learning Circle members would want to stay engaged in a conversation related to evaluation. While the question was never formally asked, the members answered by not only attending, but also contributing thoughtfully and substantively over the course of the project. With their participation, members illustrated the value of exchanging ideas, developing a deeper understanding of how evaluation could capture outcomes of interest to arts practitioners, the open environment that facilitated conversation about each individual's ongoing work, and the opportunity to contribute to a set of tools that could help tell those stories. These conversations between community development and arts practitioners underscore the importance of such partnerships and exchanges. Both sectors are working in our nation's communities and, through partnerships like these, to build on their common values to work in concert rather than in parallel for the ultimate benefit of communities.

Based on the contributions of both the community development NeighborWorks organizations and the arts participants in the Learning Circle, the social outcome and physical conditions tools were revised to incorporate additional questions related to the arts. In addition, several modules or short question sets were created to delve into key areas identified as gaps. Thanks to these contributions, the tools now incorporate a broader spectrum of experience for residents related to arts and culture work in their communities including issues related to displacement and not belonging. Additionally, the tools now more fully embed the importance of creating the art or event and the accompanying relevance to building relationships among residents in a place.

The emergent themes and contributions of both the NeighborWorks organizations in Tier 1 and the Learning Circle in Tier 2 also built much of the foundation for the Creative Tool Working Group's efforts in Tier 3 to produce two tools using arts-based methods to create, collect and analyze data. Those tools, Community Voice and Community Connection and Social Cohesion, are a first step in fulfilling the Learning Circle members' desire for more publicly available tools using creative methods to evaluate the outcomes of creative community development. Building on concepts that emerged from the Learning Circle, the tools contain clear instructions, a facilitation guide, and an opportunity for making meaning of the information gathered with residents.

The online publication, [Success Measures Creative Community Development Evaluation Tools](#), presents the outcome measurement tools that benefited from this rich cross-sector engagement.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Participating Neighborworks Network Organizations

Dwelling Place, Grand Rapids, MI  
Foundation Communities, Austin, TX  
Hudson River Housing, Poughkeepsie, NY  
NeighborWorks Blackstone River Valley, Woonsocket, RI  
NeighborWorks Salt Lake, Salt Lake City, UT  
RUPCO, Kingston, NY

## Appendix B: Learning Circle Members

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization/Location</b>
Julie Akerly	City of Tempe Arts & Culture Division Tempe, AZ
Donna Benton	City of Dover Dover, NH
Ronda Billerbeck	City of Kent Arts Commission Kent, WA
Lisa Burk-McCoy	New Hampshire State Council on the Arts Concord, NH
Julie Burros	Affiliate, Metris Arts Consulting Chicago, IL
Margaret DeMott	Durham Arts Council Durham, NC
Amanda Dyer	Creative Waco Waco, TX
Eric Feinstein	Otocast, LLC Multiple locations
Bill Flood	Community Development Consultant Portland, OR
Anne Gadwa Nicodemus	Metris Arts Consulting Easton, PA
Ritika Ganguly	Independent Consultant Minneapolis, MN

<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization/Location</b>
Jessica Gelter	Arts Alive! Keene, NH
Karen Goeschko	Wisconsin Arts Board Madison, WI
Julie Hain	South Jersey Cultural Alliance Hammonton, NJ
Divya Heffley	Office of Public Art Pittsburgh, PA
Victoria Jones	The CLTV (Collective) Memphis, TN
Sallyann Kluz	Office of Public Art Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council, Pittsburgh, PA
Sue Lambe	Art in Public Places Program City of Austin, Austin, TX
Joe Landis	City of Lancaster Lancaster, PA
Susannah Laramée Kidd	Affiliate, Metris Arts Consulting Philadelphia, PA
Eboni Lewis	Culture Blocks, Arts & Science Council Charlotte, NC
Libby Maynard	Ink People, Inc. Humboldt, CA
Dominique Miller	Institute of Art and Design, New England College Henniker, NH
David Pankratz	Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council (retired) Pittsburgh, PA
Surale Phillips	Decision Support Partners, Inc. Palm Beach Gardens, FL
Matthew Ramirez	Transportation Department, City of Austin Austin, TX
Kathleen Rubin	City of Austin Austin, TX
Annis Sengupta	Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC) Boston, MA
Yolanda Sepulveda	Spectacle Design Pasadena, CA
Matt Sikora	Arts Education Collaborative Pittsburgh, PA



<b>Name</b>	<b>Organization/Location</b>
Susanne Theis	Discovery Green Houston, TX
Jeffrey Vitarius	City Center Waco Waco, TX
Holly Whisman	Arts and Science Council Charlotte, NC
Jerica Widow-Rivers	Cheyenne River Youth Project Eagle Butte, SD
Erika Wilhite	Artist's Laboratory Theatre Bentonville, AR
Erin I. Williams	Worcester Cultural Coalition/City of Worcester Worcester, MA
Greg Wright	CREATE Portage County Stevens Point, WI

### **Appendix C: Creative Tools Working Group Members**

Aki Abata - Artist Consultant, Forecast Public Art

Barbara Schaffer Bacon - Co-Director, Animating Democracy, Americans for the Arts

Debra Dahab, Ph.D. - Enquire Research

Calece Johnson - Network Relationship Project Manager, NeighborWorks America

Jessica Mulcahy - Director, Success Measures Philanthropic Evaluation Strategies, NeighborWorks America



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