

SMU DataArts Releases Study to Help Advance Audience Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion as Performing Arts Organizations Reopen Following Pandemic

DALLAS (SMU) – April 29, 2021 – As performing arts organizations in the United States emerge from pandemic closures, SMU DataArts has released a new study to help these institutions address the question “When we re-open, whom will we gather?” and to take advantage of this time of reconnection to increase audience diversity. The study, [*The Intersection of Funding, Marketing, and Audience Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*](#), examines pre-pandemic audience diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) along the dimensions of race and income at 24 large performing arts organizations in the United States to provide a baseline of past trends and a roadmap for the future. The new research is part of a series of recent publications by SMU DataArts that are designed to help arts and cultural organizations contend with the crisis of systemic racism.

Highlights of the report’s findings reveal that over the course of a seven-year period from 2011 to 2017:

- BIPOC community members made up 44% of the population where the performing arts organizations in the study were located, but only 17% of audiences. Households earning less than \$50K per year made up 42% of the local population, but only 14% of audiences. Racial representativeness—the extent to which the racial characteristics of the served customer base reflect equitable participation—improved modestly over time, while income representativeness decreased.
- Financial support given by individuals to arts organizations had no association with the racial representativeness of those organizations’ audiences, but this type of support had an increasingly positive impact on income representativeness.
- The positive impact of foundation and government support on both dimensions of audience DEI intensified over the seven-year period.
- The negative impact of corporate support also intensified over the period studied, with high levels of corporate support ultimately being associated with the lowest levels of audience DEI.
- Strategic marketing and advertising campaigns are indeed effective tools for enhancing audience DEI.
- The size of the subscriber base has significant, negative effects on both dimensions of audience DEI.
- Organizations located in more racially and/or income diverse neighborhoods have an audience base that is more reflective of that diversity. When people travel within the city, they tend to select destinations where the sociodemographic characteristics are similar to their own.

“Our society is polarized, but research has shown that shared cultural experiences can help bring people together and combat their negative perceptions of each other,” said Zannie Voss, director of SMU DataArts. “We know that the arts and culture field is committed to DEI, but the data shows just how difficult achieving it is, and how inequitable ‘business as usual’ has been. As large performing arts organizations similar to those in this study begin to reopen after the pandemic, there is an urgent opportunity for them and the funders that support them to redouble their efforts to enhance audience

DEI, and for increased, equitable funding for arts organizations that primarily serve BIPOC or low-income communities.”

How can audience DEI be improved?

The Intersection of Funding, Marketing, and Audience Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion offers a number of ideas for improving audience DEI based on the study’s findings:

- Set specific goals for audience diversity and measure progress toward achieving them. While many performing arts organizations have DEI statements on their websites, none of the organizations in this study had set explicit goals for audience diversity.
- Organize discussions among staff and board members about whether their organization actively and effectively promotes DEI.
- Engage those who live in nearby, diverse neighborhoods. The arts are radically local; people more than a mile away from an organization are less likely to attend, especially if they are in BIPOC or lower-income households.
- Increase the number of differentiated marketing packages and increase targeted advertising to reach diverse communities.
- Pursue foundation and government support for initiatives to increase racial and income diversity of audiences.
- Pursue individual support for initiatives to increase audience diversity in terms of income levels.
- Consider corporate partners carefully.
- Grantmakers and donors that seek to increase diversity in the arts can examine whether their philanthropic support has resulted in the desired impact, and if there are opportunities to enhance audience DEI by providing more equitable support to organizations whose core mission is to serve BIPOC and lower-income communities, alongside continued investment in large performing arts organizations that have concrete commitments to measurably improve DEI.

The paper is the result of a two-year research project by SMU DataArts, the national center for arts research that provides data-based insights to help arts and cultural nonprofits across the country. The research focused on 24 large performing arts organizations across the country and analyzed anonymous box office data from 2 million local households that patronized these organizations over a seven-year period from 2011 through 2017. Researchers also conducted interviews with 33 performing arts professionals charged with creating and implementing DEI initiatives.

The Intersection of Funding, Marketing, and Audience Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion is the latest in a series of SMU DataArts studies intended to help arts and cultural organizations combat racial and income inequities as they prepare for the post-pandemic future. The recent paper [In It for the Long Haul](#), developed in collaboration with Jill Robinson, CEO of TRG Arts, estimated the pandemic’s effect on the nonprofit arts sector and asked questions to help organizations maintain passion for the communities they were formed to serve. Audience DEI is anchored in the notion of community orientation, which surfaced as an essential cornerstone for attaining sustainability in the two-part series of reports on *The Alchemy of High-Performing Arts Organizations* ([here](#) and [here](#)), co-published with The Wallace Foundation.

On Tuesday, May 11 at 2 p.m. ET, SMU DataArts will host a webinar about the study results, titled *The Community You Keep: Audience Diversity in the Performing Arts and the Post-pandemic Landscape*, Zannie Voss will discuss how the findings can help arts organizations navigate

challenges and build financial resilience. To learn more and to RSVP for the session, please click [here](#).

ABOUT SMU DATAARTS

SMU DataArts, the National Center for Arts Research, is a joint project of the Meadows School of the Arts and Cox School of Business at Southern Methodist University. SMU DataArts compiles and analyzes data on arts organizations and their communities nationwide and develops reports on important issues in arts management and patronage. Its findings are available free of charge to arts leaders, funders, policymakers, researchers, and the general public. The vision of SMU DataArts is to build a national culture of data-driven decision-making for those who want to see the arts and culture sector thrive. Its mission is to empower arts and cultural leaders with high-quality data and evidence-based resources and insights that help them to overcome challenges and increase impact. To work toward these goals, SMU DataArts integrates data from its Cultural Data Profile, its partner TRG Arts, and other national and government sources such as Theatre Communications Group, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Census Bureau, and IRS 990s. Publications include white papers on [emergence from the COVID-19 crisis](#), [culturally specific arts organizations](#), [protecting arts organizations through downturns](#), [gender equity in art museum directorships](#), [working capital and the resiliency of BIPOC organizations](#), and more. SMU DataArts also publishes reports on the health of the U.S. arts and cultural sector with the annual [Arts Vibrancy Index](#), which highlights the 40 most arts-vibrant communities around the country. For more information, visit www.smu.edu/dataarts.

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