Research Brief

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How to Cultivate Demand for the Arts

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Despite decades of effort to make high-quality works of art accessible to all Americans, demand for the arts has not kept pace with supply. Audiences for classical music, jazz, opera, musical theater, theater, and the visual arts have declined as a percentage of the population, and the percentage of these audiences age 30 and under has declined even more.

These trends raise questions about public policy on the arts. *Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy*, a new RAND report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, examines whether current arts and education policies address the challenges created by diminishing demand.

Abstract

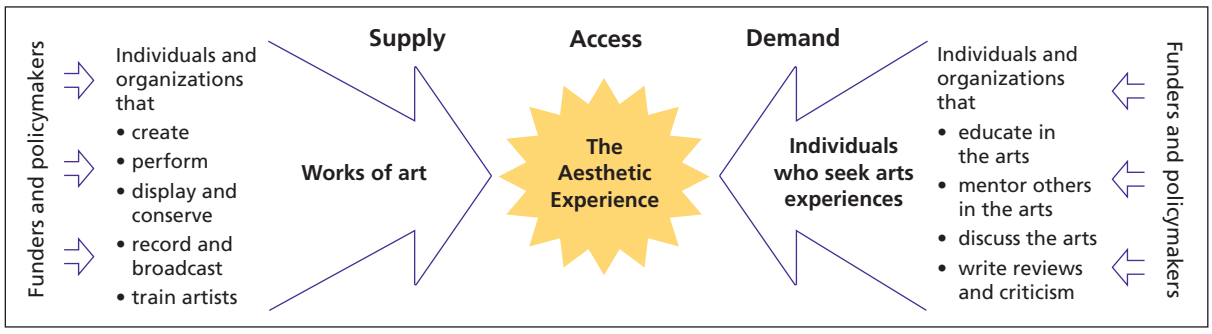
Demand for the nonprofit arts has not kept pace with supply. This research examines what it means to cultivate demand for the arts, why it is important to do so, and how it can be done through comprehensive arts learning; how well the current institutional infrastructure for arts learning is providing such learning, both inside and outside of schools; and what state arts agencies and other policymakers in the arts and education can do to help build long-term demand for the arts.

Supply, Access, and Demand

The figure offers a framework for understanding supply, access, and demand as they relate to the arts. At the center of the diagram is the individual experience of a work of art, or aesthetic experience, which is made possible by the institutions and individuals that contribute to supply on the one hand and demand on the other. Supporting the supply of artworks is a vast infrastructure of artists, people who train artists, arts-producing and -presenting organizations, and the many other contributors to the creation, display, and performance of artworks. Supporting the demand for the arts are the individuals and institutions that help draw people into engagement with works of art and teach them what to notice and value in the encounter. The main actors here are the K–12 school system, private instructors and teaching artists, journalists and critics, and those who mentor relatives and friends in the arts they themselves love. Some agents, including policymakers, contribute to all three dimensions.

The authors argue that the focus of cultural policy should be on maximizing the experiences at the center of the diagram, not the number and quality of artworks. This requires a balance of policies that

- increase the number of works of art that have the potential to provide an engaging arts experience
- promote the opportunity for citizens to encounter such works of art



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- cultivate the capacity of individuals to have engaging experiences with works of art.

The third objective, which has received the least attention from arts policymakers, is the focus of the report.

Cultivating Demand

Cultivating demand in this sense is not about marketing campaigns and public outreach. Rather, it is about giving people the skills and knowledge they need to have rich encounters with works of art that keep them coming back for more. This can be done, according to many arts education experts, by developing in learners

- the ability to see, hear, and feel what works of art have to offer
- the ability to create within an art form
- historical and cultural knowledge that enriches the understanding of works of art
- the ability to draw meaning from works of art through reflection and discussion with others.

National and state arts content standards developed in the 1990s to define what K–12 students should learn at every grade level embody just such a comprehensive approach.

Institutional Support for Such Learning

The researchers provide an overview of the entire institutional infrastructure for the support of arts learning: K–12 public schools, colleges and universities, and community organizations. Acknowledging limitations in the available data, they assess the extent to which Americans, particularly those of school age, are provided with the broad-based learning likely to stimulate long-term arts involvement.

The amount of arts instruction in schools was typically found to be very limited and to focus predominantly on creating and performing, which is what arts educators are trained to do. Although existing arts content standards call for the development of both appreciation and performance skills, the implementation of these standards is undermined by the unwillingness of most states to hold schools accountable for student progress in arts learning of any kind. Arts organizations, colleges, and other institutions have developed promising educational programs, but these reach relatively few students and cannot substitute for strong school-based arts education.

State Arts Policy

Typically, state arts agencies (SAAs) have played a minor role in arts education, which has been seen as a responsibility of the public schools. Data on the value of state grants over 20 years show that less than 10 percent of it directly supported arts learning. That percentage rises if all grants with an educational component are included, but there is little information on the nature of the education provided.

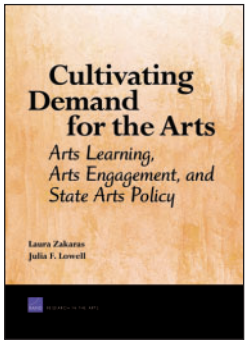
With arts participation declining and arts education losing ground, some SAAs are now devoting greater attention to cultivating demand. In states such as Rhode Island and New Jersey, for example, the SAAs have leveraged their position at the nexus of state government and the arts community to support comprehensive arts education in the public schools.

Policy Implications

Policymakers have underestimated the critical role of arts learning in supporting a vibrant nonprofit cultural sector, the researchers argue. Unless the young develop an interest in the arts and learn to respond to the "language" of different artistic disciplines, they are not likely to become members of the adult arts audience.

There are a number of policy options that SAAs and other policymakers should consider to strengthen the infrastructure for standards-based learning. These include working collaboratively to conduct a census of arts education in their states, developing a high school graduation requirement in the arts, recognizing and publicizing arts learning programs considered exceptional by experts in the field, and advocating for changes in state policy that increase the amount and breadth of arts learning opportunities.

Most important, all key players in the arts world—the National Endowment for the Arts and SAAs, leaders of arts institutions and their boards, and professional organizations of arts educators—should find common cause in promoting comprehensive arts learning. Only by working together are they likely to persuade the general education community—and the American public—of the way arts learning can draw individuals into engagement with the culture around them. ■



This research brief describes work done for RAND Education and documented in *Cultivating Demand for the Arts: Arts Learning, Arts Engagement, and State Arts Policy*, by Laura Zakaras and Julia F. Lowell, MG-640-WF (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG640/), 2008, 172 pp., $30.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4184-5. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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