**Reflections on the Arts & Civic Engagement Impact Initiative**
**April 18, 2008 Working Group Meeting**

This paper reflects our thinking based on the discussion at the April 18 Working Group meeting for the Arts & Civic Engagement Impact Initiative. A lively and deep exchange was generated by the Conceptual Framework presented in the briefing paper, which depicted a working theory of the social efficacy of the arts. The discussion got to the heart of the challenges of measuring the social impact of arts-based engagement and informed and somewhat shifted the Initiative's objectives and its theory of change. Our reflections as follow are organized in relation to the elements of the briefing paper and the Framework. Although we have not attempted to revise the Framework at this time, we may choose to return to it at a later point. Also note that, with Brad Rose's help, Animating Democracy is finalizing a theory of change for the Initiative as part of its own evaluation process. We will send this as a separate item later this month.

**Intentionality:** We maintain a primary interest in arts-based civic engagement work that is intentional in terms of civic or social effects or impact. We acknowledge that some organizations may be engaged in arts-based work that has social or civic change intention but may not be labeling it as such. These efforts are worth keeping in the initiative's field of view as well.

**Outcomes:** The Initiative will emphasize in its research and resource development what were described in the briefing paper (page 10) as *intermediate effects* of arts-based civic engagement. These include such outcomes as: heightened awareness or deepened knowledge of civic/social issues; increased understanding of other perspectives; increased or more diverse participation; increased capacity for engagement and dialogue; new relationships built and/or existing relationships strengthened; connections made that cross institutional boundaries such as policy domains or sectors.

We support that civic engagement is important both as an end in itself and a means to further civic and social outcomes. Because civic engagement and the creation of human, social, and community capital are acknowledged as the place where the arts make perhaps their greatest contribution to social change, it is important to unpack and understand such *effects* as those listed above in order to discover the best approaches to measurement and case-making. We would also emphasize that the types of outcomes listed above are not always *intermediate* steps toward some greater impacts but rather, for some arts-based efforts, may be considered a viable end in themselves.

While the Initiative acknowledges that impacts such as changes in policy, systems, problems solved, and decisions made are appropriate aspirations for some arts initiatives or programs, especially over time, such impacts—*what might be considered social justice impacts*—can rarely be attributed solely to the arts. Further, these impacts are often beyond the resources of most organizations and this Initiative to assess. The Initiative should focus on how to assess such impacts in order to help arts practitioners and stakeholders understand if and how to position their arts-based efforts in relation to these types of changes, and what are reasonable expectations and approaches to assessing change and gauging the arts' role in change.

Additionally, Animating Democracy is interested in understanding how "artistic effects" or the creation of "artistic capital" through arts-based civic engagement work uniquely contributes to social and civic change outcomes. This concept relates to the current focus across arts and civic sectors on understanding and developing creative communities in which artists and cultural organizations deploy imagination as a creative force in the regeneration of cities.

Finally, we agree that *accidental* and *incidental* social/civic outcomes occur and that a byproduct of our work may be ways to help groups be on the lookout for and capture such accidental or incidental outcomes.

**Context:** The Initiative will attend to the context within which arts-based civic engagement efforts are conceived, implemented, and evaluated. Theories of change need to rigorously consider social, political, economic, and other contextual conditions. The Working Group offered contextual factors to be considered when assessing social and civic efficacy, such as: cultural norms, belief systems, history; political environment, economics, people involved, timing, resources available or not available, and artistic capacities.

The Initiative will seek to better understand the relationship between context and understanding social/civic outcomes. It will look at the particular challenge of knowing if and how larger civic or social impacts may be linked to particular arts-based programs or organizations given that other factors may be influencing outcomes.

The Initiative will also seek to better understand the relationship between context and case making. As was described in the briefing paper:

> A major issue for the field is the challenge of documenting effects and impact of arts-based civic engagement initiatives in a way that generalizes beyond a specific community context. For that reason, it is important to understand the role that context plays in the success of particular initiatives in order to provide guidance to others. Contextual variables may influence selection of illustrative cases, for example, to ensure that findings are relevant to many users. Similarly, information about contextual variables should help guide adaptations to tools. Contextual variables that are important to attend to in describing findings include: size and nature of community; demographics of community; cohesion/polarization within the community; history of/related civic engagement initiatives; history of/related community arts initiatives; and position/history of sponsoring unit(s).

**Individual versus collective:** While we acknowledge the transformative power of arts experiences for individuals and the value of individual transformations to social change, the Initiative is not focusing on individual transformation. Rather, the Initiative seeks to advance approaches to measuring collective and community change, with the understanding that individuals and individual change are part of and contribute to collective and community change.

**Scope / scale:** In terms of scale, programmatic initiatives—*those that are bounded and clear enough in shape and focus making it possible to assess their contribution to social change*—are of greater interest than one-time events. The Initiative maintains an interest in understanding when and how to feasibly track long-term and cumulative effects and outcomes of arts organizations, programs, and institutions.

**Advancing field practice by promoting a culture of evidence:** Beyond making good tools available, the Initiative will work to promote a "culture of evidence" in the field. The Working Group challenged the assumption that disseminating the "best, most practical tools" would drive better practice. Before good tools can be used, practitioners need to see the value and benefits of evaluation. Therefore, the Initiative will work to create a "suite of resources" designed to: encourage organizations to "start the conversation;" promote evaluative thinking; demonstrate how evaluation can *realistically* address their needs; and offer systems for inquiry. It will aim to help practitioners make better implementation choices based on the civic or social outcomes they wish to achieve. If cultural organizers are better equipped in this way, they may be inclined to make reasonable efforts to identify and track useful and meaningful outcome indicators.

The Initiative will work in a more comprehensive way to equip practitioners with systematic ways to think about evidence and impact, including data collection and analysis that balances quantitative and qualitative evidence. A distinction was made between "metrics" (a quantitative indicator) and "measurements" (which could be qualitative as well as quantitative in nature). We found this helpful and will deemphasize "metrics" in our communications so that it is clear we value both types of evidence and to underscore that there are systematic ways to gather and analyze qualitative evidence as well as quantitative. The Working Group's suggestion of tools includes:

- "Basic questions" that help practitioners begin thinking about evaluation; helping them to see what they can evaluate (some such basic questions itemized by the Working Group are found in Appendix B);
- An accessible and welcoming tool, such as a DVD that helps educate practitioners about what evaluation is, how it can realistically address their needs, and motivates them to evaluate;
- Definitions to aid practitioners in understanding evaluation (terms and definitions should be culturally sensitive);
- A glossary containing commonly used terms that helps to distinguish various outcomes of arts-based civic engagement work, such as community building, social justice, social change (see Appendix A for a draft of such terms);
- A compendium of evaluation stories and ideas that open up people's minds about evaluation;
- Flexible evaluation models that focuses on short-term impacts;

- Models for small-scale projects; also creative models, e.g. documentation scorecards that help practitioners think about scenarios and how to document and assess them;
- A simple toolkit to help organizations appropriately evaluate their programs.

**Case-making:**  We remain most committed in this initiative to helping practitioners make a better case to their own stakeholders, funders, and civic leaders (often at a local level) through more solid evaluation and communication practices.

The intent to create case-making message points as a strategy for broadly positioning the arts as valid contributors to civic engagement and social change has shifted.  This is based on the understanding that a body of convincing evidence first needs to be accumulated in order to substantiate benefit claims. We now see that this is outside the scope of this Initiative.  The Initiative will open up to a broader view of case making that expands beyond proving (which we know is problematic), advocating, or convincing.  We will also looks at models of *documentation* that effectively demonstrate *what is possible* in terms of change through arts-based civic engagement. In addition, as expressed at the Working Group meeting, we agree that our efforts are best directed to inform and promote realistic expectations on the part of funders, but that a broad-based effort aimed at policy level leaders and decision makers is outside the scope of this Initiative.

That said, learning about the values and interests of the sectors and stakeholders the Initiative seeks to influence remains of central interest.  We will move ahead to understand what kinds of evidence and documentation about the social efficacy of arts-based civic engagement are convincing and compelling, what are obstacles, and what have been effective case making approaches.

# APPENDIX A — COMMON TERMS

**Terms and frames to define and guide:** We believe that the initiative should recognize the various kinds of change that can occur through arts-based civic engagement, for example community building, social change, and social justice. It is useful to name and differentiate these kinds of outcomes, both for clarity and for appropriately evaluating outcomes and case making. In the Addendum to this memo, we offer definitions of common terms used to denote such change.

## Civic engagement
There are many ways in which people participate in civic, community and political life and, by doing so, express their engaged citizenship. From proactively becoming better informed to participating in public forums on issues, from volunteering to voting, from community organizing to political advocacy, the defining characteristic of active civic engagement is the commitment to participate and contribute to the improvement of one's community, neighborhood and nation. The question often arises: Is civic engagement a measure or a means of social change? We see that civic engagement may be either, depending on the context and intent of efforts. Our investigation embraces both possibilities as valid.

## Social capital
The collective value of all "social networks" (who people know) and the inclinations to do things for each other that arise from these networks ("norms of reciprocity"). Specific benefits that flow from social networks include trust, reciprocity, information, and cooperation. Bonding networks that connect people who are similar sustain *particularized* (in-group) reciprocity. Bridging networks that connect individuals who are diverse sustain *generalized* reciprocity. (This definition comes from Robert Putnam, Better Together, an initiative of the Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University; www.bettertogether.org/socialcapital.htm)

## Community building
The process of improving the quality of life in a neighborhood or community by strengthening the capacity of residents, associations, and organizations to identify priorities and opportunities and to work, individually and collectively, to foster and sustain positive neighborhood or community change. (The Aspen Institute)

## Community engagement
Deliberate and active ways arts organizations engage constituents and publics in order to align organizational goals, programs, and services with community interests and needs. Community engagement might take the form of assessment processes, working with advisory groups, and ways of gathering community input to develop more relevant and meaningful programs. Another meaning of community engagement relates to seating programs in community settings and collaborating with community partners to foster participation of targeted community members in arts and cultural programs and activities.

**Social change**
Craig McGarvey describes *human, social, and community capital* as three interconnected and measurable outcomes of civic engagement work *(Civic Participation and the Promise of Democracy,* 2004). Human capital is the development of individual potential. Social capital is the development of networks of human and institutional relationships, with measures of depth, breadth, diversity, and durability. Community capital is the development of positive change in communities, with measures of problems solved or prevented, policies improved, systems and institutions made more accountable. We find this to be an embracing, asset-oriented framework for thinking about the range of particular outcomes that constitutes social change, from attitudinal change to the building of public will, to policy change that corrects injustice. We acknowledge that social change must start with the individual, but for this initiative will emphasize impact that happens at the collective level.

**Social Justice**
Many definitions of social justice refer to fair treatment and impartial distribution or allocation of benefits afforded to all individuals and groups in society. We see "social change" as the broader umbrella and "social justice" as more particular, reflecting policies, laws, etc. as well as socially upheld behavioral norms that foster fair treatment and share of benefits.

**Dialogue**
Two or more parties with differing viewpoints working toward common understanding in an open-ended, most often, face-to-face format. In dialogue:
- *Multiple and possibly conflicting perspectives* are included rather than promoting a single point of view.
- *Empathy and understanding* are promoted.
- *Assumptions* are brought out into the open.
- *Suspension of judgment* is encouraged in order to foster understanding and break down obstacles.
- *Equality among participants* is established to honor all voices and help build trust and safety for deep dialogue.

(Study Circles Resource Center and *The Magic of Dialogue* by Daniel Yankelovich)

*Civic* **Dialogue**
Dialogue in which people explore matters of civic importance and consider the dimensions of a civic or social issue, policy, or decision of consequent to their lives, communities, and society. In civic dialogue, participants understand the civic purpose of the dialogue. Participants are encouraged to contribute their own views and listen actively to others.

**Arts- or humanities-based civic dialogue/engagement**
In arts- or humanities-based civic dialogue/engagement, the artistic process and/or art /humanities presentation provides a key focus, catalyst, forum or form for public dialogue/engagement on the issue. Opportunities for dialogue/engagement are embedded in or connected to the arts or humanities experience. In addition, the arts may provide a direct forum to engage in community planning, organizing, activism, and therefore is a form of arts-based civic engagement. (Animating Democracy, Americans for the Arts)

# APPENDIX B – QUESTIONS FROM WORKING GROUP DISCUSSION

In addition to the questions outlined in Part 2 of the briefing paper, we find these questions offered by Working Group members valuable to guide the initiative's inquiry:

### Re. the intiative's theory of change:
1. What will be <u>observably</u> different as a result of the initiative? Who, or what, will be different or be changed? What difference does that difference make?

### Re. evaluation methodology and tools:
2. What is the range of ways in which arts-based civic engagement can be illustrated and measured?
3. What kinds of indicators and ways of measuring change are used by other fields that are interested in social change?
4. How do we create a framework (or multiple frameworks) of systematic inquiry that organizations or projects of varying scales and types can implement? Can we offer frameworks that are appropriate for different scenarios?
5. What does a simple tool look like, the kind that is easy to digest and will effectively get practitioners to begin a discussion on the merits of starting an evaluation process?
6. What are a set of "Basic Questions" (see below) that could help practitioners approach evaluation design?
7. How can we ensure that tools are culturally appropriate/sensitive?
8. How can we best connect to and motivate the arts field into taking on the hard and meaningful work of evaluation? How do we create the demand among artists, practitioners, and participants (e.g. through community-based arts training or academic programs, funder requirements, practitioners' own internal motivation)?

### Re. case making:
9. What are all of the different kinds of civic engagement that can be advanced by the arts, and which are best advanced by the arts (in terms of strategizing the message to potential "enemies," who might be more persuaded if they could see that the arts addresses one thing more than another)?
10. Can what is measured that is project- or place-specific be aggregated across projects, programs? And if the answer is no, how will we convey the limitations?


<u>*Basic Questions</u>: Working group members offered these questions which might be considered among others:
1. Who is the audience [for the evaluation] and what effect do we want to have on the audience?
2. What is the theory of the arts-based civic engagement work?
3. How do the data and the story compare to each other?
4. Who are the evaluators? How do you make them responsive to the process?
5. In designing evaluations, when should questions be framed and designed?
6. What is the <u>usable</u> product that will come about as part of the evaluation, and what is its utility by its community?