



A New Research Agenda for the National Endowment for the Arts: FY 2017-2021

This document sets forth a five-year research agenda for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The agenda has three purposes. First, and most characteristically, [social scientific and behavioral research](#) about the arts—as with any sustained research endeavor—requires the systematic pursuit of topics and techniques so that, ideally, each investment builds on prior work while advancing fresh lines of inquiry. Second, an agenda can speak to other researchers and arts funders and practitioners who may wish to join the NEA directly or indirectly in pursuing an agenda item. Third, for internal and external stakeholders alike, the agenda permits regular progress reviews, to determine that milestones have been met, or whether new information suggests a need to change course on a particular project.

In preparing this agenda, the NEA’s [Office of Research & Analysis](#) (ORA) surveyed recent accomplishments in U.S cultural policy research as well as knowledge gaps identified by the research literature or from consultations within and outside the agency. The agenda itself is a crucial element of ORA’s 2017-2021 strategic plan, which designates a series of goals and objectives for the office’s work in research and evaluation.¹

Background: The First Five Years

ORA’s research mission, “To promote public knowledge and understanding about the value and impact of the arts in American life,” conforms to the NEA’s current strategic plan. This mission was also served by the NEA’s initial five-year agenda (fiscal years 2012 through 2016), the byproduct of national research conversations about the arts ecosystem and about appropriate measurement models for it.

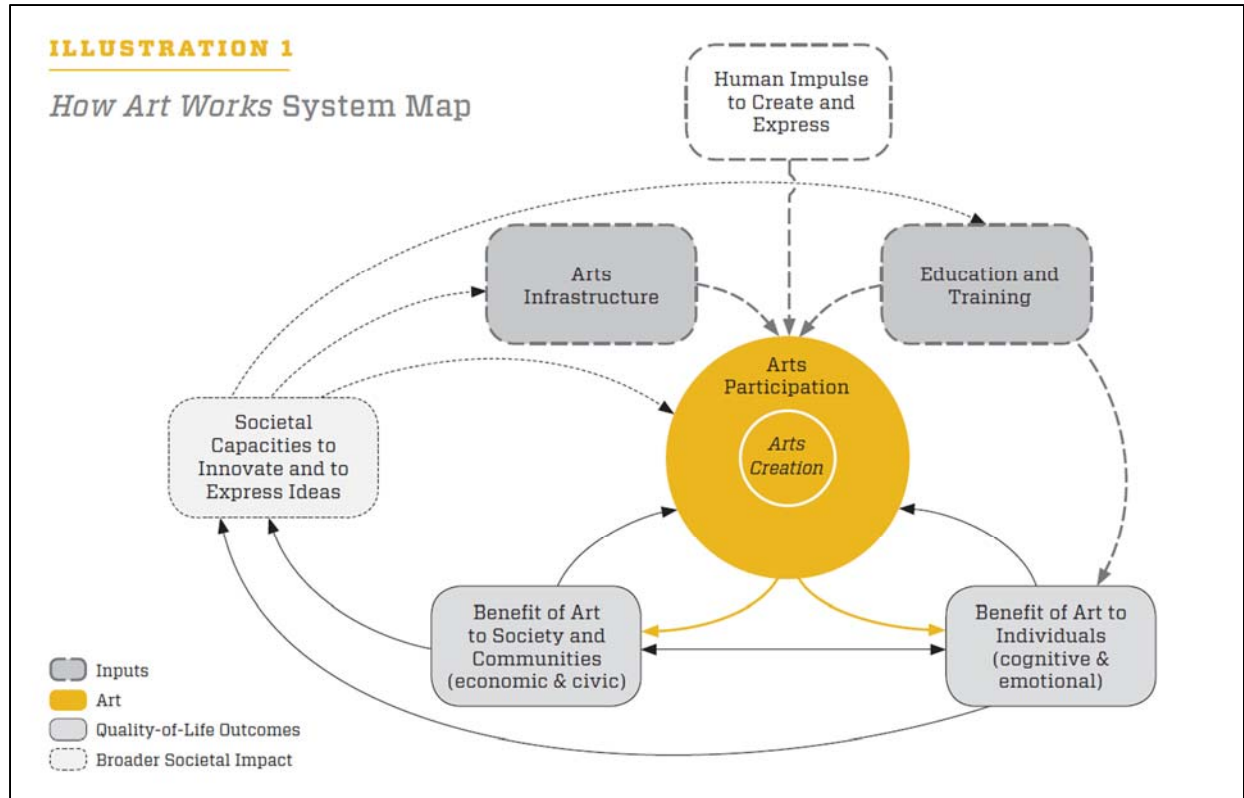
A NEA report, [How Art Works](#) (2012), mapped this ecosystem for the arts. The report then populated this “map” with a series of research projects (“milestones”) to be concluded by FY 2017. At the outset of FY 2017, in fact, ORA had met **87 percent** of the agenda’s milestones.

Below is the system map from the 2012 *How Art Works* report.

¹ ORA’s three goals, taken from its strategic plan for FY 2017-2021, are: 1) *Conduct, commission, and contextualize* high-quality, policy-oriented research on the value and impact of arts and culture; 2) *Develop models, methods, and metrics* that report the impact of the NEA’s performance and provide a resources for nonprofit arts organizations to better account for their own performance; and 3) *Improve capacity for researchers* outside the NEA to conduct rigorous, high-impact studies about the arts. Goal #1 necessitates development of a research agenda.

ILLUSTRATION 1

How Art Works System Map



Progress on the *How Art Works* research agenda led to five distinct areas of accomplishment for the NEA and ORA. They included:

1. Collecting and reporting more robust data about U.S. arts participation patterns.

Examples: In partnership with the U.S. Census Bureau, designed and/or expanded multiple surveys about arts participation; [analyzed and reported trend data at the national and state levels](#); and posted results and data tools for other researchers, cultural policy-makers, arts practitioners, and the general public.

2. Bringing more rigor and regularity to economic valuations of the arts.

Examples: In partnership with the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, created the [Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account](#) and began work to regionalize it. Research findings from the account have been reported widely in the mainstream and trade media, and they have initiated policy discussions, across the U.S. and abroad, about measuring the economic value of the creative sector.

3. Expanding support for researchers to investigate the value and impact of the arts, thus helping the NEA to fulfill a core part of its mission.

Examples: Launched a grants program supporting investigator-initiated research projects; posted [research findings from these grants](#) to the NEA website; increased support for quasi-experimental and experimental study designs; and issued the first in a series of solicitations to create “NEA Research Labs,” transdisciplinary teams of researchers and arts practitioners.

4. Engaging the public with arts data and analytical tools.

Examples: Established a freely accessible [National Archive of Data on Arts & Culture](#), which includes not only 265 arts datasets containing more than 73,000 variables, but also web-based tools to run analytics on-demand; created an [“Arts Data Profile” series](#) on the NEA website, to enable the public to interact with specific arts datasets and research findings; produced, tested, and posted to the NEA website a set of

[“Arts & Livability Indicators,”](#) using public datasets to benchmark plausible outcomes associated with creative placemaking activities.

5. Building and sustaining federal research partnerships around the arts and human development.

Examples: Convened quarterly meetings of the [Interagency Task Force on the Arts and Human Development](#), a coalition of representatives from 19 federal entities, to catalyze new research and information-sharing about the arts’ role in human development. Co-sponsored, with the National Institutes of Health, a National Academies research workshop on the arts and aging; produced three national reports from Task Force activities; and publicized federal research and evidence-based programming through a series of highly-attended public webinars, now [archived on the NEA website](#).

The *How Art Works* research agenda covered a lot of ground. Not only did the underlying system map sketch a vast, complicated set of domains and relationships deserving of study, but the agenda itself accommodated many different kinds of research project. They included: investigating specific hypotheses about the arts; designing surveys to collect new information on arts variables; and establishing programs and resources to incentivize researchers to study arts-related topics.

In contrast, the NEA’s new research agenda (FY 2017-2021) is restricted to studies or analyses that will produce findings on a specific topic of interest. Although the NEA continues to pursue several tactics to build capacity for arts researchers and evaluators—operating the [Research: Art Works grants](#) program, for example, and maintaining the National Archive of Data on Arts & Culture—those tactics appear in ORA’s strategic plan and not in its research agenda.

The NEA’s Office of Research & Analysis (ORA) relied on three guiding principles in establishing its five-year agenda:

Foundational – ORA will continue to build, enhance, analyze, and archive public datasets—and produce data tools, technical guides, and other research resources—to promote more rigorous and relevant studies of the arts.

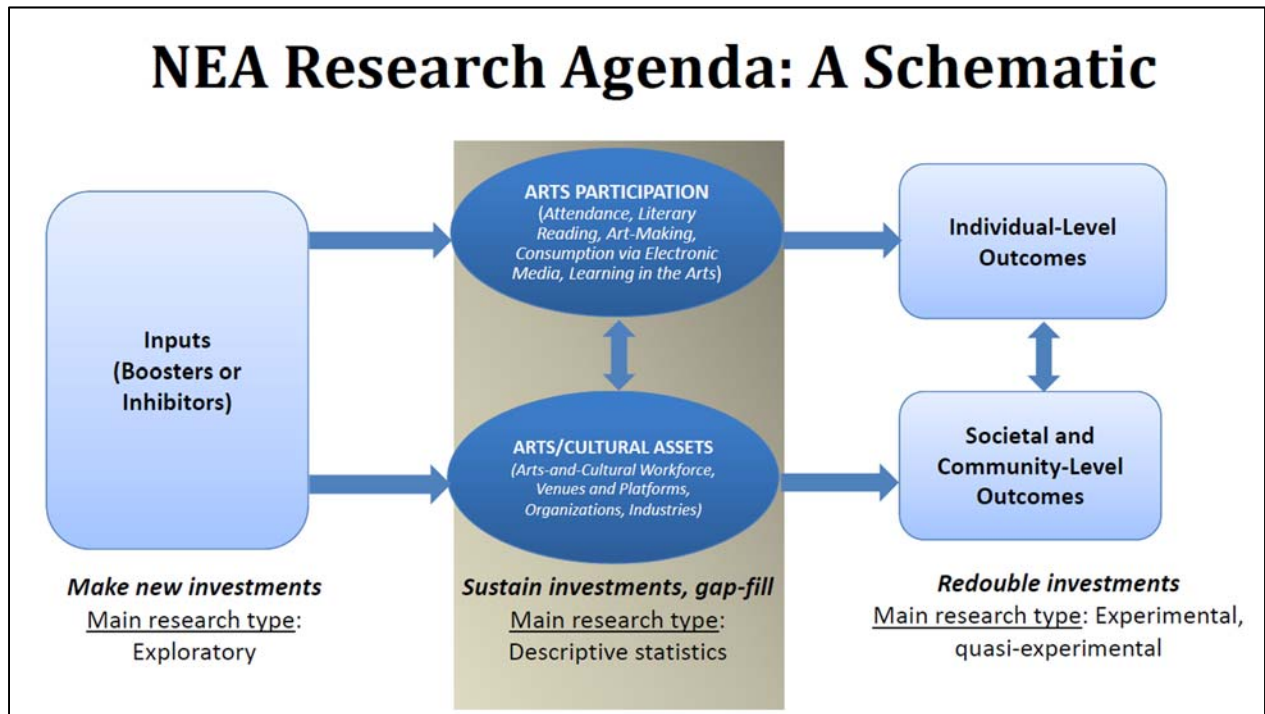
Collaborative – ORA will continue to identify and pursue partnership opportunities with federal agencies and other sectors and fields of expertise to broaden the reach and relevance of arts-related research.

Adaptive – ORA will continue to monitor federal research priorities and field-wide trends for how they might affect research about the arts, and the unit will rapidly accommodate research requests from NEA leadership.

Research in FY 2017-2021: A New Schematic

Reflecting a tighter focus on selected elements of the arts ecosystem described in *How Art Works*, the FY 2017-2021 research agenda flows from a new schematic. Far from representing a logic model or theory of change for “how art works,” the schematic aims to supplement, not replace, the 2012 system map. It limits the field of inquiry to specific domains and relationships within the ecosystem. For clarity’s sake, however, certain variables have been retitled and/or repositioned so that the model can serve as a stand-alone schematic.

Below is the new schematic guiding the NEA’s FY 2017-2021 research agenda.



At the center of the schematic are two ovals, which harken back to the respective nodes, “Arts Participation,” and “Arts Infrastructure,” on the *How Art Works* system map from 2012. **Arts Participation**, in the new schematic, remains inclusive of various modes of participation. These modes are: attending arts events; reading literature; creating or performing art; consuming art via electronic media; and learning in the arts. But now Arts Infrastructure also has been designated as a central concern of NEA research—specifically in its new appellation, **Arts/Cultural Assets**, which denotes artists and arts workers, arts venues and platforms, and arts organizations and industries.

Historically, the NEA’s research office has always aggregated and analyzed data about both of these domains. Whether reporting the percentage of American adults who participate in the arts, counting the number of workers in artist occupations, or estimating the total economic value of arts industries, ORA has helped to build, maintain, and update federal statistical systems for measuring the arts. This is core measurement work in which the NEA plays a unique role across government. Consisting largely of the production and refinement of descriptive statistics, this function will continue unabated over the next five years, according to the agenda. In short, ORA will sustain these investments, while attempting to fill knowledge gaps.

On the left-hand side of the model is a rectangle labeled **Inputs (Boosters or Inhibitors)**. This box is meant to represent a host of selected factors that either enhance or inhibit both of the central values of the model (Arts Participation and Arts/Cultural Assets). Whereas in the 2012 system map, the key “inputs” to Arts Participation are “Arts infrastructure” and “Education,” the new schematic admits of a constellation of factors—some of which may yet be unknown—that affect the health and vitality of Arts Participation and Arts Infrastructure, respectively. To understand these factors, the NEA research office

will make new investments in studies that are exploratory in nature, quite possibly starting with qualitative research (e.g., case studies).

On the right-hand side of the model are two broad categories of outcome that flow from the central ovals, Arts Participation and Arts/Cultural Assets. The outcome categories are grouped by level of analysis: **Individual-Level Outcomes**, which may be seen as resulting directly from Arts Participation by individuals, and **Societal and Community-Level Outcomes** resulting from the presence of Arts/Cultural Assets in communities or across the nation. To investigate these outcomes further, ORA proposes heightening investment in research using experimental and quasi-experimental study designs. Doing so will permit researchers more rigorously to explore causal relationships that might exist between the arts and positive individual and/or group outcomes.

What do we mean by distinguishing between these categories of outcome? The schematic acknowledges not only horizontal movement—i.e., the linear relationship from “Inputs (Boosters or Inhibitors)” to “Arts Participation” and “Arts/Cultural Assets” and then to “Individual-Level Outcomes” or “Societal and Community-Level Outcomes.” The schematic also recognizes vertical relationships (e.g., from Arts Participation to Arts/Cultural Assets and vice versa). In particular, the linkage here proposed between “Arts Participation” and “Individual-Level Outcomes,” on the one hand, and between “Arts/Cultural Assets” and “Societal and Community-Level Outcomes,” on the other, is not meant to exclude the possibility of individual-level outcomes deriving from the presence of arts or cultural assets in a neighborhood. Similarly, societal or community-level outcomes may derive from individuals’ participation in the arts.

Once again, this schematic is not a logic model or theory of change about how art functions. Instead, it clarifies values and relationships that will drive ORA’s investment of resources.

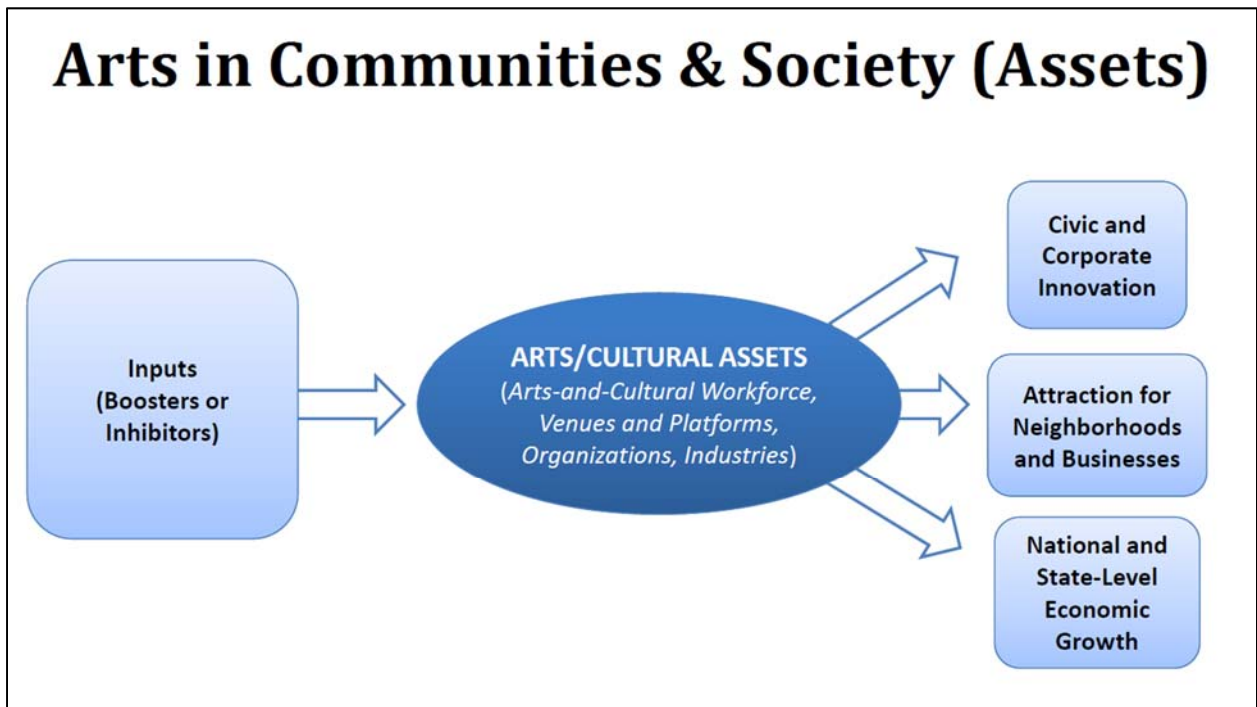
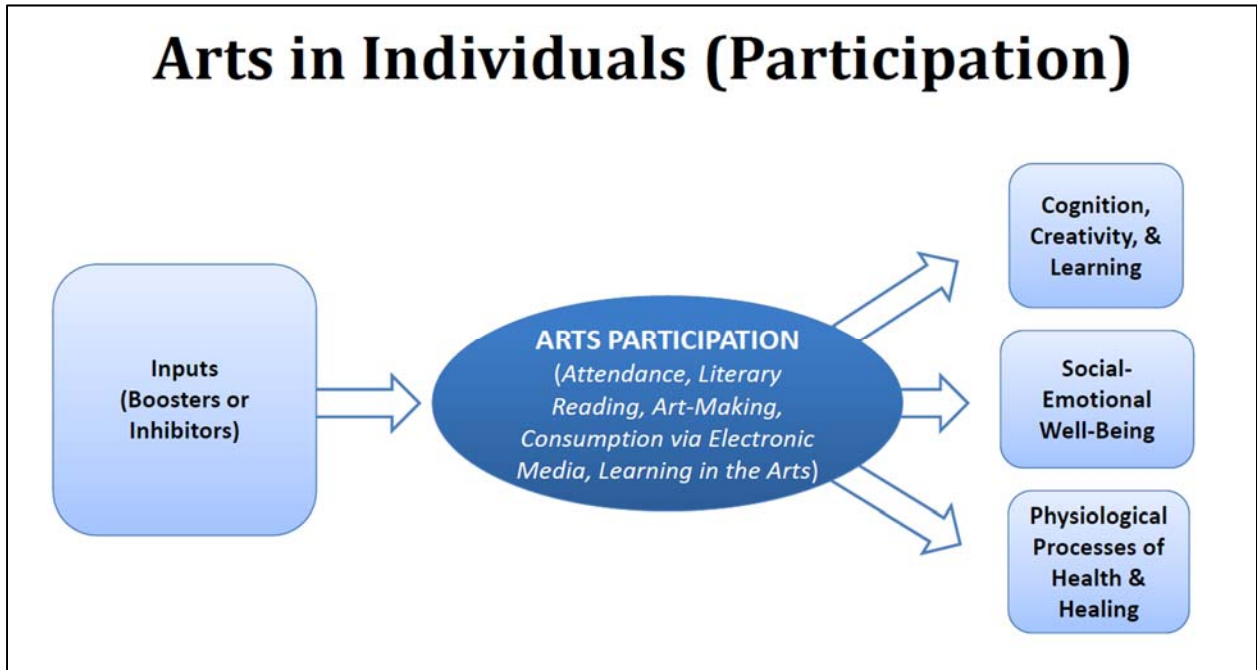
Breaking Down the Outcome Areas

The next two diagrams capture outcome areas specific to Arts Participation and Arts/Cultural Assets. In the first diagram, individuals’ arts participation is seen to correspond with three types of outcome, all of which can be measured at the individual level. Broadly, they are: **Cognition, Creativity, and Learning** (e.g., improvements in problem-solving capacity, divergent thinking, memory retention, or transfer in learning); **Social and Emotional Well-Being** (e.g., improvements in resilience, grit, mood regulation, or perspective-taking); and the **Physiological Processes of Health and Healing** (e.g., reduction of neurocognitive or motor skills degeneration; reduction of pain; or improved circulation).

The second diagram shows plausible outcome areas associated with the presence of Arts and Cultural Assets. To be measured among organizations, industries, or geographic or demographic subgroups, they include: **Civic and Corporate Innovation** (e.g., improvements in civic engagement or entrepreneurship); **Attraction for Neighborhoods and Businesses** (e.g., improvements in residents’ attachment to community, or the ability of place to draw a talented labor force); and **National and State-Level Economic Growth** (e.g., a growing proportion of the gross domestic—or state—product being generated by arts and cultural industries).

Before leaving this section, it is important to stress that the outcome categories listed above (and depicted below) are not watertight. Rather, they each stem from a distinctive body of research establishing or supporting hypotheses for a positive relationship between the arts and the outcome area in question. Also worth noting is that while *positive* relationships are indeed implied here, NEA-

supported studies that uncover no relationship, or even a negative relationship, will be valued to the extent that they invalidate or otherwise qualify such hypotheses.



Research Topics and Approaches

Now that a framework has been created for illustrating the research domains of interest to ORA, it becomes necessary to identify topics within each of them. Below, for each of the terms described above, is a series of tentative topics or items that will populate the NEA’s five-year research agenda. They are not research *questions*, which will result from direct engagement with the topics themselves. Alongside each research topic is a potential research approach—that is, the data sources and/or methodologies that ORA deems useful in the topic’s investigation.

| Agenda Item # | Research Agenda Topic | Description | Potential Research Approach |
|---------------|--|--|--|
| | Arts Participation: Selected Inputs | | |
| 1. | Motivations and barriers | Analyze and report reasons for participating (or not participating) in arts activities, and any related barriers. Investigate how these factors—in combination with geographic, socio-demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral variables—help or hinder arts participation. | Use sources such as the 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA) and the 2016 General Social Survey (GSS). |
| 2. | Personal preferences and tastes | Analyze and report preferences for specific art forms (e.g., dance, theater, visual art) or modes of participation (e.g., attendance, art-making, consumption via electronic media). Investigate how these factors—in combination with geographic, socio-demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral variables—help or hinder arts participation. | Use sources such as the 2017 SPPA, the 2014 Health and Retirement Study (HRS), U.S. Department of Education longitudinal surveys, and the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID). |
| 3. | Role of digital media | Synthesize new and extant data about the role of technology in engaging the public with arts experiences. Research questions may include: a) what are shared and divergent practices | Use one or more of the following sources: a national survey of nonprofit arts organizations; a scan of NEA grant project documentation; analysis |

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| | | among nonprofit organizations in using technology to promote arts engagement; b) what factors predispose adults to use technology to engage with the arts; and c) which organizational practices appear effective in using technology to promote arts engagement, by mode and art form? | of 2017 SPPA findings; and case studies of nonprofit practices to engage the public with arts via technology. |
| 4. | Extent of ticket price elasticity | Analyze and report the relationship between changes in admission prices and the demand for visual and performing arts events. | Conduct a systematic literature review or meta-analysis. |
| 5. | Cultural influences for distinct population subgroups | Analyze and report on factors affecting arts participation by population subgroups that are typically under-represented (and under-reported) in large federal datasets. | Conduct an ethnographic case study series. |
| | Arts Participation: Core Variables | | |
| 6. | Descriptive statistics and trends | Analyze and report on factors such as: frequency, length, and breadth of arts participation; where and with whom participation occurs; geographic, socio-demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal characteristics of participants and non-participants; and longitudinal changes in participation. | Use sources such as the 2017 SPPA, the 2014 GSS, the 2014 HRS, the 2013-2016 Annual Arts Basic Surveys (AABS), the American Time Use Surveys (multiple years), U.S. Department of Education longitudinal surveys, and, where applicable, social media data. |
| | Arts Participation: Discipline-Specific Gaps | | |
| 7. | K-12 arts education access and enrollment | Support a NEA Arts Education data initiative that would incentivize state-level reporting of arts ed. data to the public. | Provide technical consultation services in the administration and oversight of grants supporting these efforts. |

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| 8. | Literary reading today: a deep dive | Synthesize new and extant data about literary reading patterns in the U.S. to answer questions suggested by the nationally-reported, long-term declines in reading. | Use sources such as the 1982-2017 SPPA, the 2013 and 2015 AABS, the American Time Use Surveys (multiple years), and other surveys and industry reports. Use social media data if applicable. |
| | Individual-Level Benefits of Arts Participation | | |
| 9. | Older adults' health and well-being | Analyze and report correlations between arts participation (particularly art-making) and positive physical and psychological health outcomes. | Use the 2014 HRS. |
| 10. | Positive outcomes associated with students who scored highly on the 2016 National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) test in arts education | Analyze and report correlations between students' performance on the NAEP arts education test and a variety of contextual factors, academic- and non-academic-related. | Use 2016 NAEP arts education assessment data. |
| 11. | Positive outcomes associated, over time, with student-level arts participation (including arts education) | Analyze and report correlations between students' exposure to arts participation and arts education, early in life, and their academic and non-academic achievements later in life. | Use longitudinal data systems maintained by the U.S. Department of Education, such as the Education Longitudinal Survey, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey, the Middle Grades Longitudinal Survey, and the High School Longitudinal Survey. |
| | Selected Inputs for Arts and Cultural Assets | | |
| 12. | Long-term patterns of household giving to the arts | Analyze and report family-level patterns of giving to the arts—over time—in relation to giving to other causes, and how these patterns relate to the socio- | Use the PSID (multiple years). |

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| | | demographic characteristics of those families. | |
| 13. | Career outcomes of arts degree-holders | Analyze and report labor force outcomes for people who have graduated with postsecondary school arts degrees, and how and whether these individuals pursue arts-related careers. | Use sources such as the “Beyond the Baccalaureate” survey, the Strategic National Alumni Arts Project survey, the National Survey of Student Engagement, and the American Community Survey (ACS). Possibly conduct case studies of recent arts graduates and alumni. |
| | Arts and Cultural Assets: Core Variables | | |
| 14. | Descriptive statistics and trends concerning artists and other cultural workers | Analyze and report on factors such as: number of artists and other cultural workers and their incomes and employment rates; geographic, socio-demographic, and occupational and industry trends; and career projections associated with these workers. | Use sources such as the ACS, the Current Population Survey (CPS), the Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account (ACPSA), the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) and the Longitudinal Employer-Household Dynamics (LEHD). Also use the 2017 Contingent Worker Survey. |
| 15. | Descriptive statistics and trends concerning arts and cultural industries | Analyze and report on factors such as: revenues and expenditures of arts and cultural industries; employment and compensation within these industries; rates of consumer spending on arts commodities; import-export rates; and proportion of intellectual property represented by these industries. Include longitudinal analysis. | Use the ACPSA (multiple years, going back to 1998). |
| 16. | Descriptive statistics and trends | Analyze and report on factors such as budget ranges for nonprofit arts | Use IRS Form 990s, County Business Patterns, and the |

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| | concerning nonprofit arts organizations | organizations, and associated levels of employment and compensation. Include longitudinal analysis and/or analysis of key variables by organization type and geographic area. | Economic Census (multiple years). |
| | Arts and Cultural Assets: Discipline-Specific Gaps | | |
| 17. | Support systems for Folk & Traditional Arts | Work with the NEA's Folk & Traditional Arts division to produce a conceptual framework that can be the subject of closer study. | Conduct a mixed-methods study of Folk & Traditional Arts support systems past, present, and future. |
| 18. | States' comparative contributions to economic growth and employment, by arts and cultural industries | Work with the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis and the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies to produce and distribute fact-sheets, maps, and visualizations. | Use regional/state data from the ACPSA (multiple years, going back to 2000). |
| 19. | State of the arts in higher education | Analyze and report on how arts instruction and programming is represented in the missions and budgets of colleges and universities. | Conduct a national survey. |
| | Community-Level and Societal Benefits of Arts and Cultural Assets | | |
| 20. | Rural innovation | Analyze and report the relationship between arts and design and innovative businesses in rural communities. | In partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Economic Research Service), use the Rural Establishment Innovation Survey and County Business Patterns. |
| 21. | Residents' perceptions about the importance of the arts to their communities | Analyze and report on the relationship between socioeconomic, demographic, and geographic characteristics of neighborhood residents and their value statements about the arts' importance. | Use the 2015 American Housing Survey. |

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| 22. | Arts, place, and social cohesion | Synthesize research and evidence-based practice concerning the role of place-based arts in fostering social cohesion within communities. | Collaborate with a healthcare foundation to support development of a research synthesis and conceptual framework. |
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Many of the tentative topics and approaches in this agenda came from a review of notable gaps that have been identified either by scanning literature or by conferring with internal or external stakeholders. In particular, where “Discipline-Specific Gaps” are referenced in the table above (see the second column), the research topic arose in consultation with NEA artistic discipline directors.

Another contributing factor has been the imminent or recent arrival of research opportunities through newly acquired datasets, partners, or funding mechanisms. Regarding the latter, the NEA has launched a new awards program supporting trans-disciplinary teams that will function as centers of excellence on key topics associated with the value and impact of the arts. These NEA Research Labs will pursue research on topics within the **Individual-Level Outcomes** and **Societal and Community-Level Outcomes** areas of the FY 2017-2021 research schematic. In FY 2017, for example, the NEA awarded Research Labs in the categories of: The Arts and Cognition, Creativity, and Learning; The Arts and Social and Emotional Well-Being; and The Arts and Entrepreneurship and Innovation.

Apart from using its Research Labs to study individual-level and societal or community-level outcomes associated with the arts, the NEA will seek to use the *Research: Art Works* grants mechanism to advance these areas of the research agenda.

Measuring Progress on the Agenda: Stay Tuned!

A variety of technical, budgetary, and personnel considerations will affect ORA’s ability to execute projects on the research agenda. Some of these factors can be anticipated; others cannot. To remain adaptive and accountable to changing demands at the NEA—and to assimilate new information within and outside the agency—ORA will use a set of criteria to prioritize items on the agenda. The criteria are Consequential, Innovative, Additive, and Opportune (CIAO).

Consequential

- If successful, will the project likely change the current narrative about the arts and their value or impact? Might key decision-makers (e.g., in arts or non-arts fields, in policy and industry) alter their practices as a result of the findings?

Innovative

- Will the project benefit from a research technique or field of expertise that historically has not been invoked in arts-related research? Do the research questions, if solved, have high potential to create new knowledge for arts managers and cultural policy-makers? For other sectors entirely?

Additive

- Does the project have high potential to build profitably upon knowledge already generated by the NEA and/or other arts researchers? Does the project extend the utility

of previously validated concepts, models, methods, or datasets? If successful, will the project enhance clarity and access of previous arts-research findings?

Opportune

- Does the project pose an opportunity to leverage resources (e.g., staff, dollars) that otherwise might be unavailable? Are the research data, expertise, and tools uniquely available to the NEA? Does the project have a high likelihood of succeeding? Are the costs and/or timeline favorable?

Using the criteria, ORA will score the research topics and assign them to two tiers. Then, to track progress on the agenda, the office will strive to complete 80% of the Tier One research projects and 50% of the Tier Two research projects by FY 2022. Meanwhile, ORA will update the list on an annual basis, both to re-evaluate projects and to report on interim progress. As suggested by the CIAO criteria themselves, **the items on this agenda are subject to change**, depending on new information that could justify one research project at the expense of another, whether or not the item is already on the agenda.

Questions/Comments?

It is to be hoped that the NEA research agenda will encourage other researchers and organizations to consider how their own work may align with these projects. Some of the projects will be conducted mainly by ORA staff, others with the help of contractors and/or NEA organizational partners. ORA welcomes any questions or opinions about the agenda, preferably with an eye toward improving the likelihood of success of the projects therein. For this purpose, please email research@arts.gov.

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