

SMU DataArts Strategic Plan FY 2023 - 2025

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DataArts

Emphasizing Research

SMU DataArts is a leading research center that delivers data and insights to the field.

This three-year strategy reflects how we intend to provide, and engage organizations and individuals with the evidence-based insights needed to build strong, vibrant and equitable arts communities.

Image features an adult student taking notes with a full bookcase in the background.



“Our future strengths lie in serving the arts and culture field through data collection, integration of data into a model of the U.S. arts and culture ecosystem, quantitative and qualitative research methods, and most importantly, insights that are robust, useful, and valued.”

Dr. Zannie Voss, Director, SMU DataArts



Our Process

Academic Research

Cutting edge research techniques and high powered computing employed to test hypotheses, build theory, and increase understanding of the arts and cultural sector.

Applied Research

Insights and methodologies applied to specific questions facing arts communities, on our own or in partnership with grantmakers and other institutions.

Engagement

Actionable findings for arts practitioners shared and discussed via white papers, articles, programming, and dialog with the field. This generates new questions to explore.

GOAL #1

Accelerate research and data-driven insights that are robust, useful and valued.

Tactics:

- Publish and distribute in-demand applied research, white papers and research-centered blog posts
- Maintain a steady pipeline of high-quality academic research projects
- Expand our research services and products to support grantmakers and national service organizations
- Invest in data management and integration, increasing storage capacity, efficiency and access

We measure success in this area through field-wide response to the research we produce, publication in high-quality academic journals and research partnerships that support decision-making and advocacy.

“Arts organizations have few advocates conducting research with the focus and caliber of SMU DataArts. Every arts nonprofit has something to gain from their work.”

Wesley Gentle, Arts Fort Worth, TX



Spotlight on Research: from Academic to Applied

SMU DataArts produces academic research for publication in leading peer reviewed journals. These projects are a cornerstone of our research mission, and have a life beyond academic use as they fuel applied research in communities and generate insights shared directly with the field. Here are some examples.

- **Ticketing demand through COVID-19:** Starting in 2020, our research team modelled and predicted ticketing demand during the pandemic based on box office data, COVID-19 rates, and cellular phone data. This work resulted in an academic paper under review at a top management journal, was shared with arts leaders via a blog post series and a webinar, and informed the ongoing development of our Market Intelligence Dashboard, a tool currently being piloted in Kansas City via a partnership with ArtsKC.
- **Audience DEI:** Our team's analysis about how donor priorities and an organization's location, subscriber base and marketing actions affect the extent to which audiences represent the diversity of the organization's community resulted in a white paper and an academic paper. The white paper has been downloaded by 1,869 readers on our website and presented to over 170 arts leaders via webinars and conference sessions. The academic paper was published in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, rated in the Financial Times' top 50 journals.
- **DEI, Psychological Safety and the Arts Workforce:** Our research team is currently wrapping up a project to examine how psychological safety of employees and workforce diversity affect organizational performance. Data was collected via our workforce demographics study with the L.A. County Department of Arts and Culture, and in turn the research led to the development of new questions about employee wellbeing and psychological safety that are now a standard part of our survey instrument. This research is under review for publication in an academic journal, and will be released to the field via a white paper in 2023.

Our new strategy will build upon these successes as we continue to pursue cutting edge research for academic publication, applied research to support communities, and publications and programs to share findings with arts leaders.

“SMU DataArts’ research documenting the impact of public funding in the arts and how Chicago compares to other major cities played a major role in our advocacy for an increased grants budget. Following this research study, City Council approved a 370% increase to DCASE’s annual Cultural Grants Program budget.”

*Kalena Chevalier, Program Director
Cultural Grants Program Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE)
City of Chicago*



Spotlight on Research: Insights that Fuel Arts Advocacy in Chicago

In 2021, SMU DataArts partnered with the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events and Bloomberg Associates to investigate the impact of public funding on the arts locally using geospatial analysis. The resulting research was utilized by the Department to successfully advocate for a substantial increase in funding and to inform its internal strategy.

This is one example of the type of research partnerships we are embarking upon to advance decision-making and advocacy for the arts at the regional and national level. Other recent and in-progress collaborations include:

- Evaluations of grant programs with partners including the Ford Foundation and Bloomberg Philanthropies
- Partners like TRG Arts for data integration, audience research and generation of market intelligence tools
- Relationships with Theatre Communications Group and Chorus America to better understand trends within their member organizations
- Partnerships with national funders like the Wallace Foundation to produce research that advances understanding within the field, and Los Angeles County Department of Arts and Culture to understand arts workforce demographics

GOAL #2

Engage the field with findings and demonstrate growth in our reach.

Tactics:

- Disseminate research findings through diverse formats and mediums including white papers, blog posts, video content and social media sharing
- Provide accessible research-centered programming that promotes sustained engagement with the arts and cultural community through dialog and learning

We measure success via growth in our audiences, depth of engagement with our work and qualitative feedback from individuals who read our research and participate in our programs.

“Grateful to have access to such knowledgeable and passionate humans for free. These webinars and workshops should be mandatory for all arts leaders.”

Jeremy Koch, Farmers Alley Theatre, MI, 2021



GOAL #3

Establish methods to enable data collection from a representative set of cultural organizations.

Tactics:

- Continue to lower the burden of data entry in the Cultural Data Profile
- Evaluate representativeness of the current dataset against IRS 990 data and identify gaps
- Cultivate data collection partners who serve organizations that are underrepresented in our dataset
- Explore field-wide interest in a coalition to co-create a representative dataset

We will measure success through a dataset representative of the full diversity of arts organizations including budget size, region, discipline and cultural focus that enables new research opportunities.

“We are asking the question: what data do we need to remain relevant? As we shift from collecting data from as many organizations as possible to focusing on a cohort of organizations that represents the full spectrum of arts and culture, our ability to generate meaningful research and truly serve the field will grow.”

Dr. Glenn Voss, Research Director, SMU DataArts



GOAL #4

Contribute to a more equitable funding model, specifically for organizations rooted in, led by or serving people and communities of color.

Tactics:

- Acknowledge history of data being used against communities of color, and the Cultural Data Profile (CDP)'s place in this history
- Co-develop equity best practices for using the CDP in grantmaking with participating funders and applicants
- Build relationships with organizations rooted in, led by or serving people and communities of color in order to better support them with data collection and research
- Focus on data collection and research projects that celebrate the arts and culture of communities of color, and advance equity in access to art, cultural funding and the sector at large

We will measure success through the depth and strength of our relationships with organizations rooted in, led by and serving people and communities of color.

Spotlight on Equity: The Role of Data in Making Change

Our Cultural Data Profile is part of a broader history of data being weaponized against communities of color via the funding process. We know from direct feedback that the CDP has sometimes been a barrier between organizations and much-needed funding, and that some of the data points and reporting formats privilege larger more resourced organizations. As one survey respondent says, “the whole system needs to be looked at through an equity lens.”

At the same time, research on equity, diversity, inclusion, and justice within the arts and culture sector is an important force for change. The data collected via our Cultural Data Profile has already been used for this purpose, and we believe that longitudinal data representing the diversity of organizations who make up the sector is an important resource.

This tension is something we continue to consider, and we are committed to exploring multiple avenues by which we can contribute to more equitable funding models. First, we will investigate how the CDP (or something that evolves from the CDP) can fit into a funding process that centers equity. We will source ideas from participating organizations and grantmakers, and become conversant in best practices which we can share with all those who use CDP data in their grants process.

Second, we will continue to seek research partnerships and projects that advance equity within the sector. This includes providing insights to support grantmakers developing more equitable models, illuminating injustices within the sector, and deepening reciprocal relationships with organizations led by and serving people of color in the hopes that we will continue to learn and grow, and we will be at the table when our skill sets are needed to advance equity goals.

“We can all benefit from access to real data to support or realign our thinking in the arts, especially now when arts professionals are trying to move toward anti-racist practices. We need to check if the needle is actually moving.”

Gwenmarie Ewing, Miami University Performing Arts Series, OH, 2021

GOAL #5

Develop and execute a sustainable business plan.

Tactics:

- Shift capacity to mission-aligned activities and manage expenses to ensure sustainability
- Transition our technology away from proprietary software towards off-the-shelf products

We will measure success through balanced budgets and the maintenance of an adequate cash balance to ensure our ongoing sustainability.

“I am proud that SMU DataArts practices what we teach. Robust financial modeling and financial trend analysis allows us to stay true to our mission and take ownership of our financial future, even as the funding landscape changes over time.”

Katie Ingersoll, Programs Director, SMU DataArts



Spotlight on Technology: Transition to Off-the-Shelf Software

Collecting high quality, longitudinal data on the arts sector remains essential to our mission, and the technology that enables this work continually evolves. Since our proprietary data collection platform was first built, the range of software available for nimble data collection, storage, security and reporting has mushroomed. Maintaining our own proprietary software is no longer the most user friendly, sustainable, secure or accessible path. We anticipate transitioning our data collection and reporting to an integrated suite of off-the-shelf software options in 2024-25.

Our commitment to our users:

- We will minimize disruption to the greatest extent possible through any transition
- We will help our constituents through any changes with pro-active communications, training, and user support
- We will select tools that meet accessibility standards and support data collection in multiple languages

“Data reporting can be a complex task, but we are there to translate between our users’ knowledge of their work and the specifics of our data collection form. We will continue to provide the support and information our users need, even as the technologies we use to collect the data evolve over time.”

Dan Gordon, Support Center Manager, SMU DataArts



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