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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is much that is yet to be understood about the long-term impacts that the COVID-19 pandemic will have on us all. From the vantage point of summer 2021, we have a degree of distance from the earliest days but are not yet fully removed from constant adjustments and a still uncertain future.

One thing we do know is that the arts and culture community, focused as it is on in-person interaction, experienced disproportionate impacts. A Brookings Institution report estimated losses in the fine and performing arts sectors of almost 1.4 million jobs (50% of all jobs) and $42.5b in sales.¹ In Sonoma County, where the economy is deeply linked to tourism and hospitality, those impacts had the potential to completely upend the arts and culture sector.

As Creative Sonoma worked to understand and support our constituents, we were regularly met with stories of resilience and innovation, dogged perseverance, and a deep-seated commitment to keep serving the community. At the same time, we collected periodic financial and staffing updates through three rounds of relief grantmaking that demonstrated the significant toll on budgets and jobs. We recognized the opportunity, and need, to formalize the collection of data and stories during this most unusual of times in order to learn and prepare for a new future together.

We also recognized that the work being done in the area of arts education and youth programs deserved in-depth analysis. Because school facilities closed and continue to have mixed ability to congregate, artists and arts organizations that served youth have experienced a compounded hit. And yet, the work of savvy and passionate teaching artists and arts education providers is inspiring and offers practical models for engaging young people in online environments. It has been critical for us to document those efforts and integrate the lessons learned as part of this study.

To help Creative Sonoma better understand and document the impacts of COVID-19 and the ensuing public safety orders, we re-engaged Olivia Dodd Consulting to conduct this study as a follow-up to the Arts + Culture Benchmark Study in 2019. Her original work provided us with an important and timely baseline of the breadth and health of the arts and culture community just a few months prior to the onset of COVID-19. The study team was rounded out by Isabel Lopez at the Raizes Collective who was also part of the 2019 Benchmark Study. Lopez provided an equity analysis of the project’s design and assistance in outreach and implementation for both studies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Arts and culture organizations are existing in a precarious bubble. While evidence of pent up demand shows in the early results of re-opening ticket sales and attendance, it is not known if that will be sustained beyond early demand, as well as how they will be impacted by the renewed mask mandates and an unknown end date for federal and state financial assistance. Supporting this point is an August 2021 analysis of COVID-19 impacts on industries and organizations where Dr. Robert Eyler from Economic Forensics & Analytics found that “Arts, Entertainment, and Recreation” is among the top 4 industries at risk in Sonoma County, with 500 lost jobs (12.5%) between December 2019 and June 2021.2

2. Although not unexpected, it is still gratifying to witness the creative sector’s unique ability to find innovative ways to serve its specific audiences and the community broadly. This was especially and profoundly evidenced by culturally specific organizations who regarded the “whole person” of their constituents and communities, and provided critical human services including the arts.

3. The impossible challenges facing schools to keep students engaged while learning remotely mobilized arts education providers to significant action. Arts organizations found opportunities for new partnerships, new programs, and new delivery systems to help classroom teachers and administrators engage students with the arts—teaching not only art subjects, but other areas of the curriculum. In some cases, arts organizations found ways to help address the disparities that came into stark relief based on racial and ethnic factors.

4. The imperative to embrace technology—in program content and distribution as well as administration and management—will likely be a strong positive well into the future. As artists and arts organizations were required to find new ways to maintain connections to their audiences, they accelerated what would otherwise have been a longer path to adopting digital strategies to create and share new work.

5. That said, it is difficult to project how receptive audiences will be to online services once live events and interaction are fully safe again. And the vexing question of how to monetize digital content was not advanced meaningfully as a result of the expanded use of online platforms.

“While I am positive about the future of our organization, I am anxious about the amount of earned revenue potential. We will need to rely heavily on donations and other forms of unearned revenue this year in order to close the gap in our operations budget. It is not clear yet where the additional unearned revenue will come from. We will have to work hard and get creative.”

—COVID IMPACT SURVEY RESPONDENT

2 COVID-19 Impacts on Industries and Organizations, Robert Eyler, Economic Forensics & Analytics, 2021, commissioned by Sonoma County Economic Development Board
The 2019 Benchmark Study determined that Sonoma County’s total landscape of the arts and culture groups is approximately 160 nonprofits, private companies, and grassroots organizations, of which 12% serve a culturally specific mission. The objective of this new COVID Impact Study was to create both a data-driven and story-driven picture of what has changed for these groups and their core audiences—what adaptation techniques were most successful and what the sector will need to thrive moving forward. The COVID Impact Study both revisits the participants of the 2019 Benchmark Report with data collected through an online survey as well as presents new interview-based anecdotes from a select group of diverse arts and culture leaders. The study’s scope includes operational and programmatic data as well as first-hand accounts of how staff have fared.

The COVID Impact Study survey was sent to the original 65 respondents to the Benchmark Study, of which 40 organizations responded (a 64% response rate). Live interviews were conducted with 14 leaders, 10 of whom were study participants and 4 non-survey participants, to gain additional insight into how the sector adapted throughout the pandemic. 12% of survey respondents were from culturally specific groups, which parallels the overall estimated total of culturally specific groups in the county. 62.5% of follow-up respondents reported revenues of greater than $50,000 in the prior fiscal year, which means the data skews slightly toward larger groups than the previous 2019 study where 52% of respondents had budgets greater than $50,000. All financial data provided was for the organizations’ most recently completed fiscal year.

The COVID Impact Study was completed before the availability of funds from the American Rescue Plan Act and the Shuttered Venue Operators Grant.
A PANDEMIC ARRIVES

STAGE 1: COVID-19 & SIP ORDERS
A(NOTHER) NEW REALITY EMERGES FOR ARTS & CULTURE GROUPS

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Sonoma County, along with much of California and the Western United States, had been awakening to the increasing frequency and severity of environmental disasters. The 2019 Kincade Fire and the 2017 Tubbs Fire had caused substantial devastation for individuals and businesses within Sonoma County. The realization that this was likely a new normal had been politically, economically, and emotionally taxing for the community. However, as with many other sectors, arts and culture groups had been learning to adapt to these changing conditions and, with an outpouring of crisis relief support, were rebuilding where there had been substantial losses. Then, on March 13, 2020 the United States declared a state of emergency for the recently designated COVID-19 pandemic and on March 19, 2020 the State of California issued a shelter-in-place (SIP) order, which fundamentally changed the daily personal, professional, and social activities of all residents.

“It felt like we were just emerging from the fires and this was one celebratory moment, then we all had to leave.”

—JESSICA MARTIN, TEACHING ARTIST

At the time that the SIP order was first executed, there was a great deal of uncertainty about how long the order would last. Many believed that this order would go on for merely weeks or, at most, a few months. In response, most non-essential groups immediately shut down or turned to remote operations to whatever extent they could, not knowing when they would return to normal. Some smaller groups laid off staff or reduced hours to weather the storm.

Schools, and their thousands of students, went on extended breaks while they revamped the curriculum and worked out union issues to address a new concept of district-wide distance learning for the remainder of the school year. This caused a shortage in childcare and put many parents in the position of working remotely while caring for and, eventually, homeschooling their children. And, for other children whose parents were still required to work on-site and for whom no other childcare option was accessible (by supply, safety or cost), many youth were left at home unsupervised and/or unable to participate in virtual school.

During the early months, the distinction between what was safe and what was overly cautious was at the top of everyone’s minds with little to no scientific answers available. Out of “an abundance of caution,” California opted for the more conservative public health approach. Traffic would disappear almost overnight and tourism revenue in Sonoma County would drop by 49%.³ The definition of “essential workers” as well as public health guidance like mask

³ https://www.sonomacounty.com/partners/statistics
wearing and physical distancing became divisive partisan issues. Eventually, as days turned into weeks, what started as an “apart together” environment, would only further exacerbate existing ideological, economic, and social divisions.

In this environment, arts and culture groups, like all individuals and businesses, were forced to consider, and then reconsider, how they would adapt to the ever-changing realities of the uncertain environment. The public safety measures that were put into place would evolve regularly over the months, creating a difficult logistical task for arts and culture programmers who were working to adapt to the shifting circumstances. Issues to consider included: staff and participant safety, community needs, contributed and earned revenue, internal capacity, and the social-emotional well-being of staff, volunteers, and audiences. Some groups opted to stay closed, while others began launching new, temporary initiatives to engage remote audiences or to provide crisis resources almost immediately.

By June 2020, the COVID-19 case numbers were turning more positive which led to a general sense that in-person activities would resume shortly. Some groups were able to organize and host in-person summer camps for youth with key safety precautions in place. But as the summer progressed and case numbers rose, it became clear that this was not the end and a return to “normal” would not be coming anytime soon. Prior to COVID-19, few if any arts and culture groups relied on delivering services online. The vast majority of programs were presented live and in-person. On average, 42% of all revenues were generated through these in-person program-related sales (tickets, subscriptions, tuition, etc.). Because schools were now scrambling to plan for a full school year of distance learning, greater barriers to arts partnerships were emerging. This reality threatened equitable access to the youth arts programming...
STAGE 2: CRISIS BECOMES REAL
THE OPERATIONAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SURVEY RESPONDENTS

It was evident from the beginning of the pandemic that there would be public health, economic and social consequences, but with a lack of clarity on the severity of the crisis and its duration there was no way to estimate what the scale might be. Nearly a year and a half later, we are able to better understand the scope of the impact on arts and culture groups but recognize that the full magnitude of events will continue to unfold for months if not years. By utilizing the data from the Benchmark Study, gathered in the Fall of 2019, only 6 months prior to the SIP orders, we can compare data from arts and culture groups’ operations. Just as the arts organizations’ responses to this crisis were mixed, the data they reported on financial, staffing, and facilities impacts is divergent.

Of the 40 groups who participated in the COVID Impact Study, 75% reported taking active measures to reduce expenses by limiting staffing and 70% reduced or suspended programming in some capacity. Through these staffing and revenue reductions, employees and volunteers ended up taking on the responsibilities of the vacant staff positions and working longer hours to fill the gaps—further stressing an already wage and capacity challenged sector.

It is unclear at this point how many, if any, groups will permanently shut down as a result of the pandemic; none of the survey respondents reported permanently closing as of May 2021.

In a year over year comparison of financial data for twenty of the participating groups, cumulative revenues declined by 32% from $37.2 million in 2019. Of the nearly $25.4 million in collective year-end revenue reported by 2021 survey respondents, a total of over $3 million (or 12%) came from crisis recovery sources like the Paycheck Protection Program, SBA grants, and special grants from nonprofit or private foundations. Current net assets collectively declined by 2.8% from $57.3 million in Fall 2019 to $55.7 million by Spring 2021.

“
We anticipated a 30% reduction in ticket sales and project income and reduced expenses accordingly. We actually experienced closer to 40% less revenue in ticket sales and project income.”

—COVID IMPACT STUDY SURVEY RESPONDENT

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4 Derived from a comparison for 20 of the 24 groups that provided financial data in both the 2021 and 2019 surveys. Two responding organizations’ data were removed from these statistics as significant outliers due to significant one-time organizational acquisitions that did not reflect their regular course of operations. One group was removed for incomplete data.
Additionally, just 18% of respondents who operated in a physical space reported receiving at least some payment extension and/or relief from their landlords or mortgage holders. Many interviewees commented that Creative Sonoma's CARGO grants specifically, as well as other relief funding, were essential to being able to pivot during the pandemic and maintain operations.

2021 vs 2019 Financials

5 5 out of 28 respondents
• Overall the impact on self-reported employment numbers was an 18% decrease in full-time and part-time jobs from February 2020 to February 2021. 37.5% reported laying off staff, 46% cut staff hours, and 54% left open positions vacant.

• On average, respondents reported using 29% of their reserves during the pandemic.

• The majority of organizations (70%) decreased or temporarily suspended programs (45% and 25% respectively). However, nearly 23% increased programs and operations.

• The source of revenue for these groups changed from 2019 to 2021. In 2019 the two largest sources of funds were earned revenues (sales of tickets, merchandise, fees) at 35% and philanthropic revenues (grants and donations) making up 36% of the total. However, in 2021 donations and grants came to make up a much larger portion of total revenue.
  - On average, 31% of revenues were generated through earned sources including ticket sales, admissions, etc. This is down from 35% in 2019.
  - Donations and grants rose to 45% of revenue (up from 35% in 2019), likely due to the increase in philanthropic crisis funding
  - Government sources remained at 19% of all revenue
  - Other income sources declined to 6% of revenues (from 10% in 2019)

• In 2019, it was found that 24% of arts and culture groups owned their own spaces. 21% of respondents who owned or rented a space prior to the pandemic downsized or broke their lease.

• 92% of survey respondents received some amount of crisis funding. 87.5% received funds from the SBA paycheck protection program in 2020 and 58% received PPP funds in 2021; 8% received an SBA Advance Grant; and 41% of respondents reported receiving relief funds from other sources.

“Revenue wasn’t as important as engagement and putting out things that were relevant.”

—LUTHER BURBANK CENTER FOR THE ARTS
A PANDEMIC ARRIVES, STAGE 2 (cont.)

“We had two options: to fold up and finish or to adapt and change.”
—DIANNA MORGAN, SONOMA BACH

2019 Revenue Sources

- Other Income: 9.2%
- Government: 19.1%
- Earned: 36.8%
- Donated: 34.9%

2021 Revenue Sources

- Other Income: 5.8%
- Government: 18.8%
- Earned: 30.7%
- Donated: 44.6%
STAGE 3: WHAT DO WE DO NOW?
ARTS & CULTURE GROUP’S PROGRAMMING PIVOTS

Concurrent with navigating operational changes, arts and culture groups were challenged to re-imagine their programming and services for the current environment. In general, four trends were observed among programmers in their consideration of their internal capacity and the needs of audiences relevant to public health, emotional wellbeing, and cultural shifts:

- go dark and/or temporarily suspend programming,
- modify existing programs or create new programming for the virtual environment,
- innovate ways to provide services in a socially distant manner,
- step back from pre-pandemic identities to reconsider the organization’s purpose and the needs of key stakeholders.

As arts and culture groups re-envisioned their programs and services, they discovered new ways to connect with audiences and adopted new practices largely around technology, developed unique partnerships to reach participants, and found a stronger and more meaningful focus on equity. Among interview participants, a theme that frequently emerged was that impossible challenges spur important changes. Time after time, arts and culture leaders spoke about how COVID forced them to evolve in unexpected ways. While all were wary of the long-term economic effects that are still playing out, the heart of their focus was on the individuals and communities that they served and how to adapt in creative ways to meet their needs. Not all groups moved to virtual program delivery. Instead, they found creative opportunities for delivery of in-person activities through art learning kits, outdoor exhibits, drop-in art tables at public health information booths, and in-person tutoring through a pod structure.

West Side Elementary student artist at work.
A PANDEMIC ARRIVES, STAGE 3

All of the organizations we spoke with not only considered its own core competencies and resources, but also listened more intently to the needs of their constituencies and then evolved to serve those as the first priority. The ways in which these organizations adapted vary greatly. Some expanded their audience reach by going virtual, serving people all over the country, while others narrowed and deepened their focus to serve a specific community in need like local elementary students.

All reported the need to adapt to changes in the funding streams and finding temporary relief through creative problem solving. In order to ensure engagement and reach, many groups offered their programming for free or at dramatically reduced costs. Bringing back earned revenue as live programming returns is a concern that was consistently expressed. Most noticeably, every group found a meaningful way to serve its constituency and, having adapted to such a different environment, each will bring forward many new tools, programs, and lessons about resiliency into their post-pandemic future.

- 60% of groups reported a decrease in the number of individuals participating in their programs since the 2019 Benchmark Study, while 38% reported an increase. Overall total participation was up by 44%.6

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6 The forty 2021 COVID Impact Study respondents reported a total of 3,001,905 individual participants in their most recently completed fiscal year and as of May 2021 up from 1,173,487 in 2019. However, in removing a significant outlier whose participation tripled due to an acquisition of another organization outside of Sonoma County, total participation for the remaining thirty-nine organizations was 501,805 for 2021 and 348,387 in 2019.
CASE STUDY: SONOMA BACH—INNOVATING A NEW FUTURE

When it became clear that the pandemic would not be short-lived, SONOMA BACH realized that its prior 30 years of experience producing programs would have to be completely reimagined. Executive Director Dianna Morgan and Musical Director Bob Worth asked, “How do we make this transition to virtual from being in person, when so much of what we do is about being together, about being in the same room, about creating together?” In pondering this question, they realized that they needed to reconsider their mission and set a new vision for whatever the duration of the pandemic would be. They honed in on three key focus areas: what they are good at, what matters to the organization, and what they mean to their community.

Through conversations with their board, instrumentalists, singers and teachers, they redefined their mission and created a new slate of online programming that would allow them to not only continue to serve their core constituency but to reach beyond their normal borders to audiences from around the world. Traditionally programming for Sonoma Bach centered on live choir performances using local talent for a dedicated subscriber audience. In an effort to present programming online that would maintain the connection to their audiences, they launched “Bach Talks”, a monthly live Zoom seminar whose audience has increased by 50% since going virtual. Additionally, they introduced “The Choir Loft,” a podcast series now at 52 episodes. And they even presented online Italian lessons to help deepen their audience’s ability to connect with the repertoire and learn something new. As Morgan said, “We’re stronger and better today than we were a year ago.”

“No matter what, we can produce it.”

—DIANNA MORGAN, SONOMA BACH

Restaurant banner by Jim Isermann for Creative Sonoma’s Creative ReOpening project in Guerneville.
CASE STUDY: CALIFORNIA INDIAN MUSEUM & CULTURAL CENTER (CIMCC)—FINDING RENEWED PURPOSE IN ADVERSITY

Prior to the pandemic, CIMCC’s primary programming encompassed in-person exhibits, field trips, and classes with an emphasis on serving the twenty-three Native American tribes of Sonoma, Mendocino, and Lake counties. They also worked to elevate Native artists through their on-site gift store. Having already engaged in relief and recovery efforts during prior years’ wildfires, when the pandemic hit Museum staff deployed existing emergency plans to activate the organization as a resilience hub for the Native American community. This meant that, under the leadership of Executive Director Nikki Lim, CIMCC was positioned to quickly adapt to the situation, leaning into existing partnerships with groups such as the Indian Collective/Native American Foundation, Partnership for Resilient Communities, Tribal Health Initiative and the Native American Cultural Fund. They applied for emergency relief funds and served their core constituency through food distributions, cash distributions, PPE and basic supplies like diapers.

“We lost the founder, the President of our board, staff...lost their parents. I heard from one woman who said she went to 10 funerals. It’s not only grief, but [the loss of] culture bearers. People we learn from. Not having those people is a huge void.”
—NIKKI LIM, CALIFORNIA INDIAN MUSEUM & CULTURAL CENTER

CIMCC youth camp workshops.
“With the added trauma of loss due to the global COVID-19 pandemic there will be much need for social-emotional art programming.”

—COVID IMPACT SURVEY RESPONDENT

CIMCC is steeped in the knowledge that the Native American community is often hit disproportionately hard during these crises and COVID-19 was no exception. According to a December 2020 CDC study, American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/NA) persons were 3.5 times more likely to contract COVID-19 than non-Hispanic Whites and mortality rates among the younger AI/NA (20-49 years old) persons were 8.2-11.6 times higher. The resource and relief work of CIMCC has become approximately 70% of its services and, through word of mouth, has helped them to expand their reach beyond the three county area to Native American tribal communities statewide. For Lim, because of the vulnerability and collective trauma within the Native American community, being a resource center is not a limited-time role, it’s an ongoing service that responds to any crisis that arises.

Following an assessment of the tribal community in its three county area, the CIMCC team recognized that in addition to providing these core emergency services, maintaining a sense of community and continuing to offer access to traditional culture was critical. However, turning to a completely virtual programming model, as other groups had readily done, presented a unique challenge for them beyond concerns about equitable access to technology and lack of tech adoption among elders. Cultural protocols within the Native American community strongly discourage the widespread sharing of tribal activities. So, being respectful of the existing protocols, Lim was able to come up with a safe and secure manner to provide virtual access to these important community events and classes with a focus on art as a means of healing and processing trauma. Additionally, they sent out 1,000 educational activity kits to students statewide in areas of traditional basket weaving and mini-redwood bark house making. Providing these programs was pivotal to the mental and emotional well-being of their community, providing a sense of togetherness and channels to process their grief. In Lim’s words, “As much as we are a museum, it’s really been about our people. [It’s] not about objects, because they have no meaning without the people around [them].”

7 https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6949a3.htm
CASE STUDY: RAIZES COLLECTIVE: A FALSE DICHOTOMY—ART FOR ART’S SAKE VS. ART SERVING A CAUSE

The vagaries of paid gigs for arts workers—both on the creative and administrative side—often require these creatives to take on sustenance work. If you are lucky, you can find a job to pay the bills that has a positive spillover effect on your art job and that was definitely true for Isabel Lopez, the founding Executive Director of RAIZES COLLECTIVE. As Sonoma County began to roll out its vaccines, county health agencies approached Lopez to work in an awareness outreach capacity to the Latinx community. Lopez’s trusted relationships in the community, earned through the prior work of the Raizes Collective in community building, made her an effective connector and ambassador between health agencies and their target populations.

Born of necessity, the opportunity both deepened Lopez and the Collective’s ties within the community and raised awareness of the organization’s mission.

Early in this work, the opportunity to bring health outreach and the arts together became clear. Lopez was able to leverage funding to hire artists from the collective to create vaccine messaging specifically designed to reach audiences in the Latinx, Native, and African American communities. Artists created videos, posters, and other materials that were distributed through print and social media channels. The effort also received extensive interest and coverage from local media.

Born of necessity, the opportunity both deepened Lopez and the Collective’s ties within the community and raised awareness of the organization’s mission. It also laid the groundwork for future collaborative efforts between these two important fields in the social sector.

A student artist silk screens with Ever Flores with Raizes Collective.
LESSONS LEARNED—SERVING COMMUNITY, INEQUITIES & CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS

Each group interviewed for this study spoke of the numerous lessons they learned as they navigated the regular changes to business, communal, and personal life. Common takeaways for arts and culture groups have centered on:

• improved accessibility through adoption of technology
• strategic advantages of cross-sector partnerships
• challenges to equity presented by unconscious biases in programming
• disparity in needs among diverse community groups
• strengthening organizational vitality through listening and responding to cultural needs, learning who to serve and how to be of service

While navigating the COVID impacts has been difficult and exhausting for most, it also seems to have reinvigorated a sense of purpose and forced long desired changes. At the time of this survey, 85% of survey respondents reported an overall positive feeling of their group’s future, 10% were neutral and only 5% felt negative.

EMBRACING THE CREATIVE OPPORTUNITY OF TECHNOLOGY

A nearly universal change for arts and culture groups over the past year has been working toward a greater and more sophisticated use of technology in operations and program delivery. For most of these local organizations, remote work and virtual programming was uncharted territory prior to March 2020. Despite gaps in technology literacy, most organizations found that some form of online video and/or audio communications was pivotal to continued contact internally and, more profoundly, with existing and new audiences. Unexpectedly for some, such as Sonoma Bach, Left Edge Theatre, Transcendence Theatre, and Healdsburg Jazz, their once geographically-specific programs have become accessible and relevant to global audiences. Most groups who adopted these new technologies commented that they envision continuing to use virtual platforms to deliver programs, although the extent of continued use is unclear at this time.

“The pandemic has given us the opportunity to re-assess and re-calibrate.”

—COVID IMPACT SURVEY RESPONDENT
LISTEN AND YOU WILL BE HEARD—THRIVING BY PRIORITIZING RESPONSIVE WORK

The direct effects of the pandemic exposed ongoing and deeply rooted cultural and social issues. Because of equity issues that were more starkly revealed by COVID-19 and the racial reckoning that followed the murder of George Floyd, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) conversations and initiatives have moved from a “nice to have” ideal toward a must-have norm. Many leaders within Sonoma County’s arts and culture organizations witnessed first-hand, some for the first time, the severity of the inequity among community groups, which has been amplified by intensifying nation-wide conversations and activities about identity, race, and class. The national manifestations of these disparities continue to play out at the local level in the number and severity of COVID-19 cases, access to internet and technology, at-home support for students, affordable and accessible childcare, vaccine hesitancy, and language barriers in crisis response.

“We really had the time to say who do we want to have a voice here? It really underscored that listening is harder. Listening to what people who have really been affected have to say. We want to hear what you want from us.”

—LINDSEY GOODWIN, PETALUMA ART CENTER

“Love Tunnel” by Jordy Morgan for Creative Sonoma’s Creative ReOpening project in Healdsburg.
CASE STUDY: PETALUMA ARTS CENTER BUILDS A GALLERY WITHOUT WALLS

The PETALUMA ARTS CENTER (PAC) serves a mission of “Building community through art.” PAC has traditionally served that mission through hosting visual arts exhibitions and hands-on educational programming in its 4,500 square foot space situated along a busy central road in downtown Petaluma. When COVID hit and SIP orders forced the Center to close its doors, like many organizations, they moved their annual student art exhibition from an in-person experience to a virtual one. However, as their partnerships with classrooms moved online, they were faced with seeing first-hand how it changed student participation. Their eyes opened to a stark lack of equity in parent involvement, supplies, and access to the technology and internet. So, although it was not in the scope of its programming, the PAC went into action and launched a donation campaign to collect resources for students at a particularly underserved school and delivered art supplies to them on their last day of class before the summer break.

Weeks later, when the murder of George Floyd sparked a national outcry, the motivation to frame more of the Center’s activities through the lens of equity went from a ‘nice to have’ to a ‘must have’. As Lindsey Goodwin, former Director of Community Engagement, said, “It’s not our job to stay silent. [...] We want to let the people who really have something to say, show their work.”

PAC’s largely White female leadership began to reconsider what their mission really meant and how their socio-cultural life experiences might be unconsciously limiting their vision, programs, and connection to their community. COVID helped them to realize that their programs did not need to be limited to their physical space and to realize that their service to the community did not need to be limited to their already engaged and comfortable community—a concept easier said than done. As Goodwin and team came to realize, “The mission of ‘building community through arts’ is so simple but it says a lot.”

PAC’s first conscious programming move in this new vein was “Art Around Town”, a socially-distant outdoor art exhibition which encouraged residents to put original works in their yards and windows. Through this concept that was not bounded by the walls of the Art Center, they were able to reach a part of the community that they had never reached before (east side of Petaluma). Following this, they developed new partnerships with grassroots groups like Petaluma Blacks for Community Development and The Kindness Committee (a group of...
LESSONS LEARNED (cont.)

13-year old social justice activists). Utilizing these new relationships to inform their understanding of needs, the PAC developed other ways of turning the physical public health restrictions into an advantage through creating more outdoor exhibitions, including on the fence in the Center’s parking lot. According to Goodwin, “Not having access to our gallery, it ended up being the best thing because we have this fence for everybody to see.”

For Black History Month 2021, the PAC worked with Petaluma Blacks for Community Development and Paige Green Photography to create the exhibition “Celebrating Family: Black History Month 2021.” The show was displayed in storefront windows throughout downtown Petaluma and showcased over 46 black and white portraits of diverse Petaluma families. In thinking about a less socially-distanced future for PAC, Goodwin still believes that engaging more diverse groups of people where they are instead of always expecting them to come to the Center is pivotal—“Bringing the artwork out into the community is [a concept that is] not going away.”

Jon Haag, fabricating parklets for Creative Sonoma’s Creative ReOpening project in Windsor.
DEEP DIVE: YOUTH PROGRAMMING
& ARTS EDUCATION

“COVID showed the major issues of equity and the children’s access to technology, to the internet, and their home lives...It gave me access to the kids’ individual stories and offered an opportunity for more empathy.”

—JESSICA MARTIN

- 74% operate youth programs (down from 88% of respondents in 2019)—of those, 45% decreased offerings, 35% suspended programs, and 20% maintained or increased programs.

- Total number of youth served in FY 2020 decreased 10% from FY 2019 (respondents estimated serving a total of 112,583 youth in FY 2020 down from 125,490 in 2019).

- 79% reported that funding for youth programs has decreased, but only 66% reported that expenses for youth programs has decreased.

- 41% partnered with school educators—59% did not partner with school educators.

- Over 72% of youth programmers serve a broad range of ages focusing on K-12th grades, while only 38% offer programming for youth under 5 versus 41% of 2019 Benchmark Study respondents.

- 72% of youth programmers provided instructional programs remotely, 45% presented performances remotely, 35% provided kits/supplies for self-paced activities, and 21% provided in-person camps or classes.

- 28 out of 29 respondents underwrite all or part of their youth programs’ actual costs: 62% underwrite the cost of participation for all youth, 35% provide scholarships/discounts based on need.

CIMCC student remote learning with teaching artist Bonnie Lockhart.
CASE STUDY: SEBASTOPOL CENTER FOR THE ARTS BECOMES A POD LEARNING CENTER

The SEBASTOPOL CENTER FOR THE ARTS (SCA) is a thirty-year-old organization that hosts local, national and international artists through a range of multidisciplinary programs at its facility. Leveraging this physical space during the SIP orders, staff re-envisioned how the crisis could be transformed into an opportunity to serve an existing strategic goal instead of closing their doors. Una Glass, the Managing Director, quickly identified that first responders and other essential workers had a critical need—support for their children who were doing distance learning, often at home alone. So armed with a space and an idea, Glass brokered a new partnership with the local school district. SCA was able to utilize the district’s access to COVID relief resources to hire an arts education specialist, Dana Swint, who developed a new Supervised Distance Learning Program.

The program offered a safe physical space for elementary school students, whose parents could not oversee their students’ home-schooling, to complete their remote work on site at the Sebastopol Art Center in small pods, while supervised by a teaching assistant. The school district was able to help identify families in need, focusing on low-income families and those with non-English speaking parents. SCA hired teaching
assistants and was able to provide one teacher for every six children. For the first three months, SCA ran the program for just an hour a day, but eventually grew it to full days. Staff walked the kids to school for hybrid days—when students spent part of the day at SCA and part of the day in their regular school classrooms. At peak enrollment, the program served a total of 36 children. In speaking about the new program, Glass said, “We were able to take children that the school district said were most at-risk and host them in the facility with a county waiver. [We were] able to help them academically and incorporate arts into their learning [through] individual attention.”

In speaking about how the COVID year has impacted SCA’s plans for the future, Glass remarked that, “What this enabled us to do was something we actually had wanted to do in the first place—to create youth arts programming that would bring kids together from all different backgrounds ... so that kids from multiple cultures would be getting together and have the arts as a way for them to learn about each other and relate to each other ...to create friendships.” Even as schools have reopened, SCA has continued to provide on-site tutoring for distance learning kids through the 2021-2022 school year. Additionally, they offered scholarships to all of their Supervised Distance Learning Program students for their Summer 2021 camps to stay connected to them, to bridge the learning experience, and to foster equity in their regular arts programming.

“What I am really interested in now is systemic change of the organizations...creating equitable systemic change within your school, district, nonprofit organization.”

—NIKKO KIMZIM
CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD

CHANGES THAT ARE HERE TO STAY

The mental barriers that may have prevented more ready acceptance and adoption of technology in arts presentations were shattered by COVID. The crash course in technology has increased the comfort level of both arts producers and their audiences with new ways of experiencing art as well as all becoming adept at all the processes that are involved to produce and access it. Organizations made financial and intellectual investments—sometimes significant—to integrate technology into many facets of arts experiences. There is a lot to be gained by continuing both the actual implementation of technology but, perhaps more importantly, by feeding a new openness to how it can facilitate exploration and change.

UNCERTAINTY OF CONTRIBUTED REVENUE

The uneasy anticipation of if and when another existential challenge will occur has become an unwelcome companion throughout this pandemic. The government’s financial support, as evidenced in the hard data, have been critical to the relative health of the arts sector since COVID’s onset. The uncertainty that lies ahead, when those supports fully and finally run out, are leaving organizations still planning for multiple contingencies.

FOCUS ON DEI—A SHORT OR A LONG-TERM CHANGE?

The rush of optimism and the outpouring of support for a common cause in the early days of the Black Lives Matter movement has faded as the work of turning slogans into meaningful actions has become real. That is true generally and in the arts and culture community as well. However, there is no question that more people in more positions of power and influence are demonstrating their commitment to listening, learning, and participating in the healing that will help us all move forward. If we can hold firm to the true north of equity, the richness of the journey will be well worth the effort.

“Untitled, Head” by Jun Keneko installed for Creative Sonoma’s Creative ReOpening project in Sonoma City.
Arts organizations have long considered themselves to be inventive and resourceful—it has been a requirement for survival. The past several years of managing crises in Sonoma County has tested that theory, but apparently not yet to its limits. The organizations that will be best positioned to emerge stronger from this latest crisis and those that follow it, will have to redefine their capacity to adapt. Learning how to respond effectively to challenges as they are presented is likely only the first step. Building adaptation into an operational state of being may be a more meaningful goal. The sector’s unique advantage is that art workers are perhaps the best example of how to do just that. After all, observing, considering, synthesizing, and remixing is a simple and apt description of the artistic process.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

A Theater For Children
Alchemia
Alexander Valley Film Society
Art Escape
The California Indian Museum
and Cultural Center
California Poets in the Schools
Children’s Museum of Sonoma County
Cinnabar Theater
City of Healdsburg: Community Services Department
City of Santa Rosa Public Art Program
Danza Azteca Ohtli Yolliztli
Danza Azteca Xantotl
El Dia de Los Muertos Petaluma
Geyserville Sculpture Trail
H-Town Youth Theatre dba Young Actors Studio and Left Edge Theatre
Healdsburg Jazz
Knights of Indulgence Theatre United States
Luther Burbank Center for the Arts
Museum of Sonoma County
Music to My Ears
Pegasus Theater Company, Inc.
Petaluma Arts Association
Petaluma Arts Center
Raizes Collective
Raven Performing Arts Theater
Ready, Set, Sketch
Northern California Public Media
Santa Rosa Arts Center
Santa Rosa Symphony
Santa Rosa Urban Arts Partnership
Sonoma Bach
Sonoma Community Center
Sonoma Conservatory of Dance
Sonoma County Taiko
Sonoma Valley Jazz Society
Transcendence Theatre Company
The Lost Church
University Art Gallery, Sonoma State University
Voigt Family Sculpture Foundation
Windsor Performing Arts Academy

INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

Argo Thompson
Artistic Director
Left Edge Theatre
Ashleigh Worley
Director of Education & Community Engagement
Luther Burbank Center for the Arts
Anita Wiglesworth
Director of Programs & Patron Services and Interim Director of Marketing
Luther Burbank Center for the Arts
Dana Swint
Education Director
Sebastopol Center for the Arts
Una Glass
Managing Director/CFO
Sebastopol Center for the Arts
Dianna Morgan
Executive Director
Sonoma County Bach
Gayle Okumura Sullivan
Executive Director
Healdsburg Jazz Festival
Isabel Lopez
Executive Director
Raizes Collective
Jessica Martin
Teaching Artist
Art Escape
Thena Trygstad
Co-Founder
Petaluma Arts Center
Lindsey Goodwin
Director of Community Engagement
Rincon Valley Education Foundation
Megan Fonseca
Executive Director
California Indian Museum and Cultural Center
Nicole Lim
Executive Director
Move Over Mozart
Nikko Kimzin
Consultant
Stefanie Hirayama
Program Director