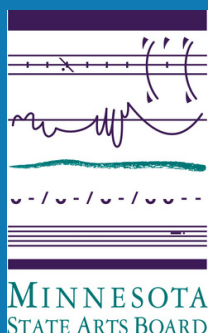


Minnesota State Arts Board

Measuring The Intersections of Arts, Health, & Well-being

A Toolkit For Arts Organizations



THE ARTS THRIVE IN MINNESOTA

Developed in collaboration with
Performance Hypothesis

arts.state.mn.us

INTRODUCTION

In Minnesota, the arts define who we are. This is a place where people are transformed by high-quality arts experiences, and see the arts as essential to their communities. The arts are integrated into all aspects of our lives, connecting people of all ages and cultures, fostering understanding and respect. This deep and shared appreciation for the arts helps make Minnesota a place where quality of life genuinely thrives.

This toolkit was created for representatives of arts organizations who want to explore the impact of their work on individual and collective health and wellbeing outcomes in their communities. It explores many aspects of program evaluation to guide and anchor the short, medium, and longer term connections between arts participation and health and well-being.



Artistic expression grew in lockstep with human cultural development and has long played an integral part in how we teach, learn, communicate and heal. Since our earliest ancestors began telling stories to make sense of the world, we have evolved to learn from narrative, be it through visual media, song or performance. The arts are uniquely suited to help us understand and communicate concepts and emotions by drawing on all our senses and capacity for empathy.

– The World Health Organization

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Evaluating the connections between various art forms and various health and wellbeing is extremely contextual. The goal of this toolkit is to equip Arts Board grantees with fundamental knowledge and best practices to explore and evaluate evidence-based health and well-being outcomes particular to your own art forms.

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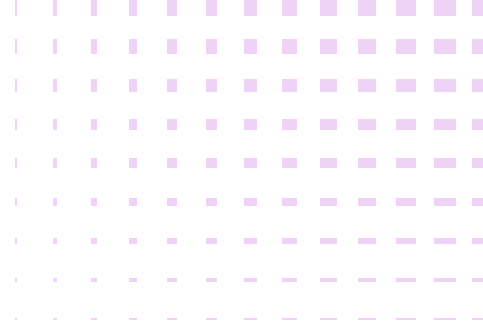
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Section 1

The Big Picture

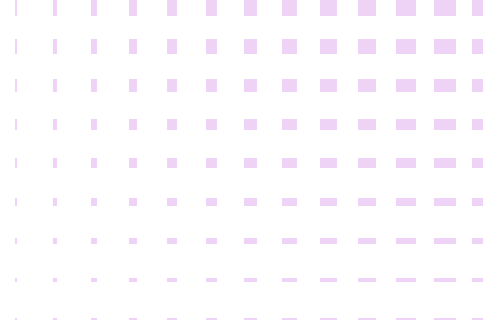


AT A GLANCE

- Arts, health, and well-being as a concept and an evidence-informed discipline
- Exploring the difference between health and well-being



Arts, health, and well-being as a concept and an evidence-informed discipline



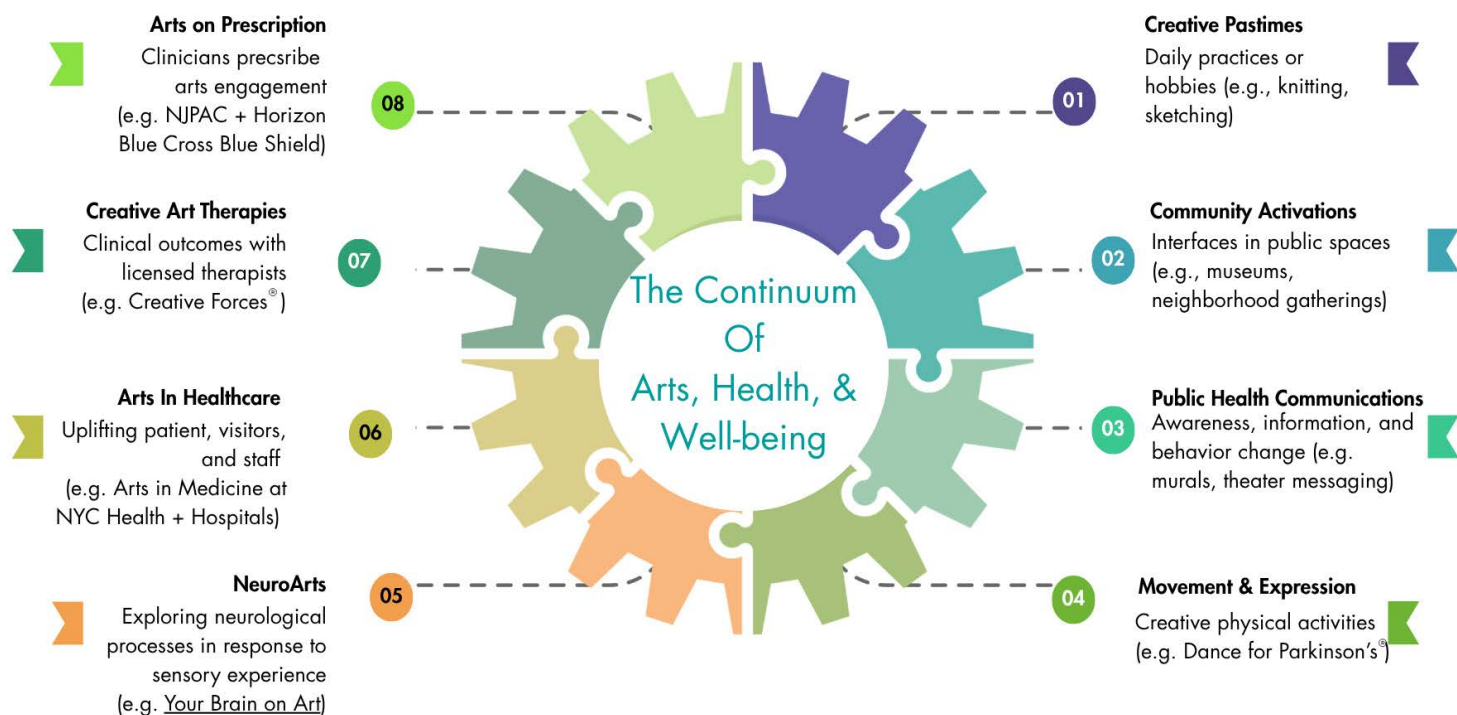
To start, let's zoom out and look broadly at the large (and continually expanding) intersections of arts, health, and well-being both as a concept and as an evidence-informed discipline.

What do we mean by arts, health, and well-being as a concept? Many of us inherently understand the roles and the values of arts in our lives and how participating in the arts is central to our health and well-being, to our values, and to our cultural practices. At the conceptual core is the understanding that the arts are essential to how we, as human beings, thrive.

Over time, scientists and researchers have found strong evidence to back this up: a variety of studies from across the globe illustrate that participating in the arts can lower stress hormones in the body, reduce pain, ease symptoms of depression and anxiety, keep the brain sharp as people age, and even help people recover faster from illness or trauma. This is the discipline of arts, health, and well-being: a systematic, evidence-informed, exploration of how creative expression makes us feel better, heal faster, and live more fully.

Arts, health, and well-being as a concept and an evidence-informed discipline

As a discipline, the field of arts, health, and well-being can currently be loosely grouped into seven established and emerging sub-fields.



Each of these sub-fields have a similar, yet different, evidence-base that is worthy of exploration. One of the goals with this toolkit is to empower YOU to explore the evidence that is of interest to you and your work.

We invite you to pause and reflect: which, if any of these are familiar to you, which of any of these are new to you? And what would you like to learn more about?

Exploring The Difference Between Health and Well-Being

"Health" and "well-being" are often used interchangeably, but they are distinct. The World Health Organization gestured toward this distinction in its landmark 1948 definition, describing health not merely as the absence of disease but as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being." That definition was radical at the time precisely because it acknowledged that health and well-being are related but not the same thing.

Health has traditionally been understood in biomedical terms: the absence of disease, illness, or injury. It is often measured through clinical indicators: blood pressure, morbidity rates, diagnosis rates, hospitalizations, and so on. Even the broader public health definition, while more expansive, tends to center on physical and mental functioning and the systems that support or undermine it. Health, in this sense, is something that can be assessed relatively objectively, often by a clinician or researcher, against established norms and benchmarks.

Well-being is a broader and more subjective concept. It refers to the overall quality of a person's life experience, their sense of purpose and meaning, their relationships, their sense of belonging, safety, and agency. Well-being encompasses emotional, social, spiritual, and even financial dimensions that fall well outside the traditional boundaries of medicine. Importantly, a person can be in poor health by clinical measures and still report high well-being and, conversely, someone can be physically healthy but experiencing profound suffering or disconnection.

The arts are perhaps more naturally and directly connected to well-being (e.g. meaning-making, joy, connection, identity, and community) than they are to clinical health outcomes, though evidence increasingly shows they can influence those too. Being clear about which domain your work is operating in helps you choose the right outcomes to measure, tells a more honest story about your impact, and makes more credible claims to your participants, partners, and funders.

Section 2

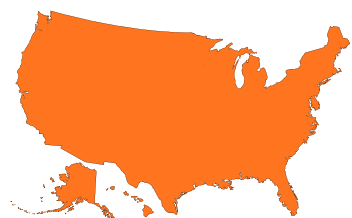
Know What's Out There

AT A GLANCE

- Established linkages between participation in the arts, health, and well-being
- Free resources for finding more evidence about different art forms and different health and well-being outcomes
- Practical techniques for separating credible evidence from the noise

Established linkages between participation in the arts, health, and well-being

This toolkit was published in 2026 and in the last several years there has been an exciting explosion of well-conducted, large-scale, studies that attest to the generalized, positive impacts of arts participation on health and well-being outcomes for individuals and communities in the US and across the globe.



Regular attendance at cultural events – museums, galleries, or live performances – is associated with **healthier aging** (staying free of chronic disease with good physical, mental, and cognitive health)
Bone, et al, 2023 Social Science & Medicine, EpiArts Lab

Participating in school-based arts activities helps **combat loneliness** in adolescents (by improving feelings of strong social support)
Bone, et al, 2023, Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology, EpiArts Lab

Creative art therapies reduce symptoms of **traumatic brain injury, chronic pain, and PTSD** – while strengthening resilience and family bonds – in active duty military service members and veterans
Creative Forces®: NEA Military Healing Arts Network, 2024



Regular attendance at cultural events – museums, galleries, or live performances – is associated with **lower odds of developing depression**
Fancourt and Tymoszek, 2019, British Journal of Psychiatry

Engaging with the arts may help **prevent chronic disease** by fostering social connections, encouraging physical activity, and addressing the root causes of health inequities.
Sonke, et al, 2025, Nature Medicine

Generalized research findings and program-specific evaluation serve different purposes. Research findings draw on data across many studies and populations to identify broad patterns. Program-specific evaluation, by contrast, measures what actually happens within your own initiatives, with your own participants. This toolkit uses research to suggest plausible long-term impacts, but it's evaluation that confirms what's truly happening in your community.

Accessible resources for finding external evidence on different art forms and health and well-being outcomes

We encourage you to take another moment to pause and reflect...what art forms are you interested in? What are the health and well-being outcomes that you know (or suspect) are associated with your particular art form?

Before diving into a Google search or querying your favorite AI model, know that you don't have to start from scratch! Many organizations have spent years studying the intersections of arts, health, and well-being and they've done the hard work of compiling credible, accessible resources for you. Here are just a few:

Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing at the University of Minnesota

"Arts and wellbeing are intrinsically woven throughout many of the courses offered by the Bakken Center. For three decades, students and lifelong learners have been able to explore creative arts and wellbeing through many of our courses."

csh.umn.edu/academics/focus-areas/arts-and-wellbeing

Social Biobehavioural Research Group at University College London

"We investigate how social connections and behaviours impact people's health. By conducting cutting-edge, cross disciplinary research, our aim is to determine how our health is influenced by both social 'assets' and 'deficits'. These include social relationships, arts, culture and leisure (assets), as well as loneliness, isolation, and social restrictions (deficits)."

sbbresearch.org

Center for Arts in Medicine at the University of Florida

"A national leader in arts in health research, education and practice. Their collaborative research labs are "investigating how arts and culture influence public health through student-led projects and national partnerships."

arts.ufl.edu/programs-schools/center-for-arts-in-medicine/research-initiatives/research-labs/

National Endowment For The Arts

"Through a series of awards, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has established a national program of interdisciplinary research teams in the arts. The National Endowment for the Arts Research Labs (NEA Research Labs) program will yield empirical insights about the arts for the benefit of arts and non-arts sectors alike."

arts.gov/initiatives/nea-research-labs

Accessible resources for finding external evidence on different art forms and health and well-being outcomes

Another valuable category of sources are funders and implementing organizations. These groups are actively putting research into practice, documenting their work, and sharing what they find. These are just some of the many organizations out there.

Grantmakers in the Arts

"The GIA Library is an information hub that includes articles, research reports, and other materials covering a wide variety of topics relevant to the arts and arts funding."

giarts.org/search

National Organization for Arts and Health

"NOAH is the national hub for arts in health – connecting people, strengthening practice, and advancing the field by coordinating, advocating, and amplifying the impact of the arts on health and wellbeing."

thenoah.org

NeuroArts Blueprint Initiative

"The Neuroarts Resource Center is a dynamic and ever-expanding platform fueled by the neuroarts community and driven by a shared belief in the power of arts and aesthetic experiences to enhance health and wellbeing."

www.neuroartsresourcecenter.com/home

Alzheimer's Association

"Music can be powerful. Studies have shown music may reduce agitation and improve behavioral issues that are common in the middle-stages of the disease. Even in the late-stages of Alzheimer's, a person may be able to tap a beat or sing lyrics to a song from childhood. Music provides a way to connect, even after verbal communication has become difficult."

alz.org/help-support/caregiving/daily-care/art-music

New Jersey Performing Arts Center

NJPAC is the anchor cultural institution for the city of Newark and the state of New Jersey. Their arts & wellbeing program is actively engaged with multidisciplinary partners across the country to explore and share the transformative healing powers of the arts and our collective wellbeing.

www.njpac.org/arts-well-being/

Accessible resources for finding external evidence on different art forms and health and well-being outcomes

Last but definitely not least, if you're curious about the health and well-being challenges that our community members face (especially important if you're designing new programs), we encourage you to take advantage of the multitude of public resources that shed light across our state.

Minnesota Center for Health Statistics

Covers public health surveys, vital statistics, and county-level population health data, including the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), Minnesota Student Survey, birth and death data, maternal and child health, health equity and disparities, and more.
health.state.mn.us/data/mchs/index.html

County Level Health Indicators

Explore the data that Minnesota's local health departments and community health boards use to construct their community health assessments.
health.state.mn.us/communities/practice/assessplan/lph/countyindicators.html

University of Minnesota Libraries

The Health Statistics Research Guide is a curated research guide compiled by University of Minnesota librarians that aggregates state, county, and metropolitan-level health statistics from numerous sources.
libguides.umn.edu/c.php?g=900313&p=10031492

Information overload is real!

Going down rabbit holes on the internet is a time suck. It can be frustrating and we often don't get the information we need. Here are practical strategies for managing information overload when exploring the existing data:

Set clear goals. Before you start exploring, identify what you're looking for and why. Are you building general knowledge, strengthening a program, or writing a grant? Write your goals down and keep them visible.

Trust your expertise. Arts and health is a dynamic and relatively young field, and no database knows your community, your programs, and your impact better than you do. Your professional judgment is itself a form of evidence.

Stay organized. Before you begin, build a simple system for capturing and categorizing what you find – even a basic spreadsheet with columns for topic, source, and key findings can save you significant time later.

Practical techniques for assessing sources and separating credible evidence from the noise

When you encounter information that comes from an unknown source there are strategies to help you **tell the difference between good and bad information**. Fortunately, journalists and educators face this challenge constantly, and their strategies for quickly evaluating evidence are ones anyone can use.



Focus on External Perceptions

- Was the study published in a reputable journal, endorsed by a trusted organization, or written about in a well-known news outlet?
- Peer-reviewed studies have been critically evaluated by qualified researchers before publication. The process isn't perfect, but it's a decent quality check.
- How often have other researchers cited the study? A high count signals that the field considers the work credible. Google Scholar makes this easy to check. (Note that for newer studies, citation counts will naturally be low so if the journal is strong, the authors are trusted, and respected colleagues are endorsing it, that's a reasonable basis for confidence.)



Focus on the Study Itself

- Who paid for the research, and did they have a stake in the outcome? Financial interests can shape findings, so identifying potential conflicts of interest is an important part of reading any study critically.
- Newer isn't always better, and older isn't always weaker but it's worth noting whether a study still reflects the current state of thinking in the field.
- Well-conducted research explains clearly how questions were framed, how data was collected, and how it was analyzed. You don't need to be a researcher to do this. If the logic holds up, that's a good sign. If it's hard to follow, that's informative too.



Focus on the Authors

- Who are they? Which institutions do they associate with? Do they have any conflicts of interest that you should be aware of? And very importantly, are they known, trusted, and credible to others in your particular space?

After working through these steps, ask yourself one final question: **do these findings apply to your art form, your participants, and your community?** Even rigorous research may not translate directly if the setting differs significantly from yours. You don't need an exact match but you're looking for meaningful patterns and evidence that a creative process produces similar outcomes across varied contexts. When that holds, you can reasonably trust the findings are transferable to your work.

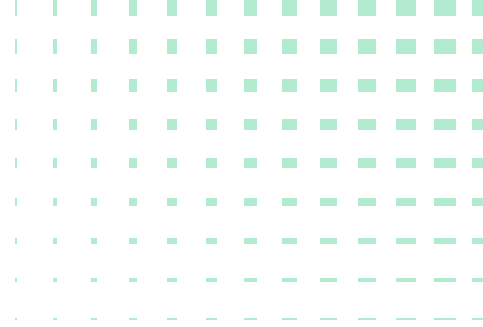
Section 3

Design Your Own Approach

AT A GLANCE

- Determining if your program is suited to explore the health and well-being nexus
- Setting realistic evaluation approaches across short, medium, and long-term timeframes
- Defining health and well-being outcomes that are specific, meaningful, and yours
- Creating and deploying evaluation tools that capture the link between your work and outcomes

Determining if your program is suited to explore the health and well-being nexus



Arts programs should exist for their own sake and they are critical with or without understanding the associated health and well-being outcomes. In some cases, you can measure the health and well-being outcomes of arts participation, and in some cases, you can't! With this toolkit we are providing guidance on how to measure the health and well-being outcomes of your arts programs. Should you decide that you do want to better understand these outcomes, there are foundational considerations that are worth thinking through carefully as a team. These should inspire honest, strategic reflections that will make your work in this space stronger and more sustainable over time.

Key Considerations



Mission Alignment. Is this direction genuinely consistent with your organization's core mission and values? Engaging with health and well-being should feel like a natural extension of what you already do and not a strategic pivot driven primarily by a noticeable trend or a specific funding opportunity. If the connection feels forced or peripheral to your core programming, that tension will quickly surface in your work, your partnerships, and ultimately in your impact.



Organizational Capacity. Health-related work often carries expectations – from participants, community members, partners, and funders – that are different from traditional arts programming. Consider honestly whether your organization has the staff capacity, expertise, and infrastructure to take this on additional level of responsibility. This includes thinking about whether you have, can access, or want to partner with people with knowledge of health frameworks, evaluation methods, and the communities you intend to serve.



Ethical Responsibilities. Working at the intersection of arts, health, and well-being potentially means navigating sensitive health information, and making evidence-informed claims about outcomes. As an organization, think carefully about informed consent, confidentiality, do-no-harm principles, and the difference between arts programming that supports well-being and health-focused interventions that may require partnerships with healthcare professionals.

Determining if your program is suited to explore the health and well-being nexus

Key Considerations, continued



Community Clarity. Health and well-being work is most effective when it is rooted in genuine community connection rather than imposed from the outside. Oftentimes, health and well-being disparities are deeply embedded in the communities that arts and health programs most often aim to serve and understanding what shaped those disparities is critical to success.



Partnership and Collaboration. Many arts organizations don't have the clinical or public health expertise to do this work alone (nor should they). Identifying potential partners (e.g. health care providers, community health workers, social service agencies, researchers, or public health departments) may be an early and critical step. Equally important is thinking through what an equitable partnership looks like, and how decision-making and credit will be shared.



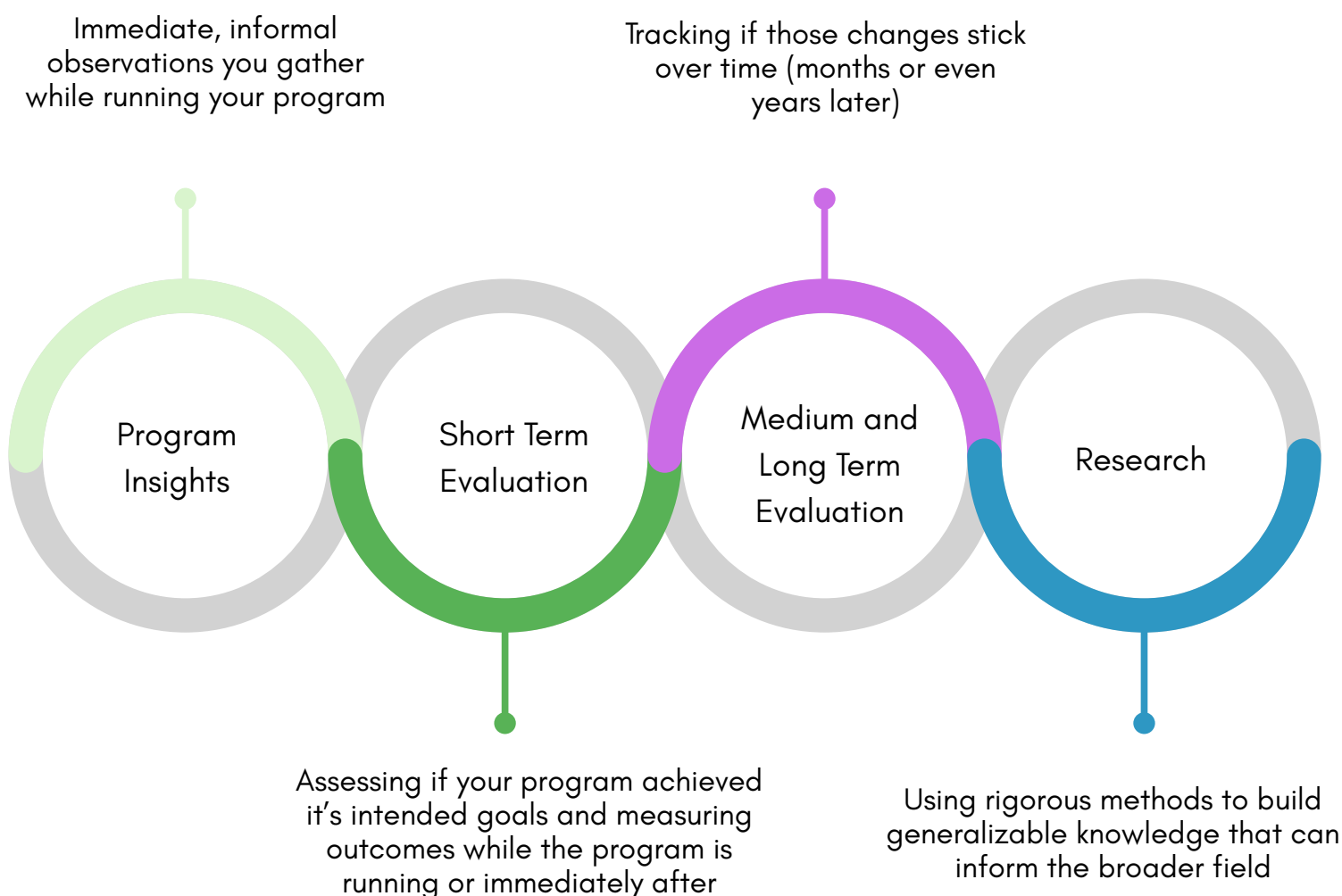
Data Readiness. Funders and health partners will increasingly expect you to measure and demonstrate outcomes. Before entering this space, consider what you are able to realistically track and document relating to the outcomes you hope to influence. This does not mean you need a sophisticated research infrastructure on day one, but it does mean having a clear and honest sense of what data your participants are able and willing to share, the tools you can produce, the confidentiality you can ensure, and the kinds of analysis you're equipped to undertake.



Sustainability. Finally, it is worth thinking about the long-term. Health and well-being programming can be resource-intensive, and the needs of participants often extend well beyond a single program cycle. Before launching, consider if your organization has a realistic path to sustaining the work – through diversified funding, institutional partnerships, or integration into existing program structures – so that you and your participants are not left without support when a grant ends.

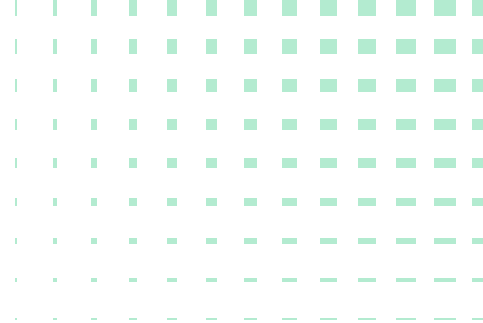
Setting realistic evaluation approaches across short, medium, and long-term timeframes

If it's the right time for your organization to start – or continue – measuring your impact at the intersection of arts, health, and well-being, it's important to develop a realistic and evidence-informed evaluation approach that's right for your organization.



This toolkit is designed primarily for Arts Board grantees looking to strengthen their short term evaluation capacities. For those interested in medium-and long term evaluation or research, please consult the [National University of Singapore's Centre for Music and Health Toolkit](#) or contact the Arts Board Director of Research & Evaluation to explore connections with local research partners.

Defining health and well-being outcomes that are specific, meaningful, and yours



Evaluation is only useful if it connects to something real in your work. Before you can find evidence, advocate for funding, or evaluate a program, you need to be clear about what you're actually trying to change and for whom. That starts with clearly defining your outcomes.

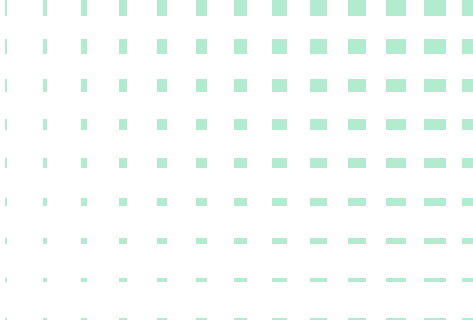
- ● Start with what you already know. You don't need a research degree to define meaningful outcomes. Start with your own experiences, observation, and program insights. What do participants tell you after a session? What do you notice in the room? What do community partners or referral sources say they're hoping your program will address? These conversations are data, and they can point you directly toward the outcomes that matter most in your specific context.

- ● Be SMART. Broad aspirations like "improving well-being" or "supporting physical health" are hard to measure and hard to defend. The more precisely you can name what you're working toward, the more useful your outcomes become. SMART objectives should be Specific, Measureable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-Bound.

- ● Make them yours. The outcomes you choose should reflect your community, your art form, and your values — not just what's fashionable in the field or what a funder wants to hear. A choir working with cancer patients may be most focused on dignity and joy. A mural program in a disinvested neighborhood may be most focused on belonging and civic pride. Both are legitimate. Both can be evidenced. Own them.

- ● Align with the evidence but don't be constrained by it. Once you've named your outcomes, look for research that supports the connection between your art form and those specific changes. You may find strong evidence. You may find partial evidence that requires some interpretation. You may find a gap — which is itself useful information, and sometimes an opportunity to explore larger partnerships. The evidence should inform your thinking, not replace it.

Defining health and well-being outcomes that are specific, meaningful, and yours



In 2025, the Arts Board launched an 18-month initiative to explore the connections between art forms and self-reported health and well-being outcomes. Working alongside a cohort of nine grantee organizations across Minnesota, we developed our first library of short-term health and well-being outcomes as a resource that we invite you to use, adapt, and build upon. This library also expands on research-informed links between these short-term outcomes and some of their potential longer-term impacts on our physical and mental health and well-being.

Health Outcomes	Definition *	Potential Long + Term Impacts
Anxiety	A feeling of fear, dread, and uneasiness. It might cause you to sweat, feel restless and tense, and have a rapid heartbeat.	• Heart disease • Cognitive decline • Dementia
Body Awareness	The ability to recognize subtle physical cues and understand how your body is positioned, moving, and interacting with itself and the surrounding world.	• Emotional regulation • Chronic pain severity
Memory	The process of storing and then remembering information.	• Functional independence • Social isolation
Stamina	The physical ability to maintain activity or complete demanding tasks over a long period without tiring.	• Heart failure • Depression
Stress	How your brain and body respond to a challenge or demand.	• Cardiovascular disease • Depression • Immune dysregulation

Defining health and well-being outcomes that are specific, meaningful, and yours



Well-being Outcomes



Definition *



Potential Long Term Impacts +

Belonging

A feeling of being happy or comfortable as part of a particular group and having a good relationship with the other members of the group because they welcome you and accept you

Positive Emotional Well-Being is associated with:

- Emotional regulation
- Sense of meaning and purpose
- Ability to adapt and deal with life challenges
- Cardiovascular disease
- Depression
- Immune dysregulation

Confidence

The quality of being certain of your abilities

Connection

The state of being related to someone or something else

Comfortability Among Peers

The sense of emotional ease that stems from mutual trust, shared interests, and balanced relationships**

Joy

Great happiness or pleasure

Loneliness

The state of being lonely (which is being unhappy because you are not with other people)

Social Connection is associated with:

- Ability to manage stress, anxiety, and depression
- Healthy eating habits and physical activity
- Quality of sleep
- Cardiovascular disease
- Stroke
- Dementia
- Depression

Recognition

Being shown admiration and respect for your achievements

Self Efficacy

A person's belief that they can be successful when carrying out a particular task

Self Image

The way a person feels about his or her personality, achievements and value to society

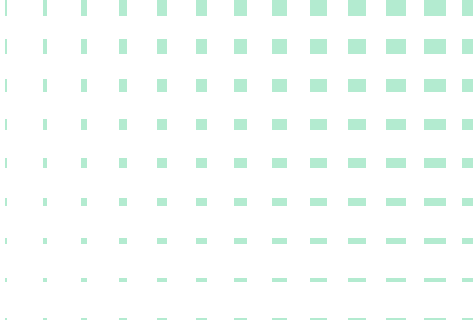
Social Inclusion

Having a connection with place, participation in meaningful activities, membership, and a sense of belonging arising from reciprocal relationships***

* Source: Cambridge Dictionary **evaluation definition ***Bogenschutz, et al. (2015) *Inclusion*.

+ Source: US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Creating and deploying evaluation tools that capture the link between your work and outcomes



You don't need a research team or a large budget to gather meaningful evidence about your program's impact: some of the most practical and credible approaches are well within reach of most arts organizations. No doubt you're already collecting a lot of participant data and we encourage you to leverage your existing tools and approaches that you know work best with your community. The goal isn't methodological perfection – it's honest, consistent documentation of what you're observing and why it matters.

First, the bigger picture...

	Quantitative Data	Qualitative Data
What It Is	Information that can be expressed as a number, counted, or measured	Descriptive, non-numerical information that captures concepts, opinions, emotions, and behaviors
What It Is Best For	Broader conclusions and trends	Insights and nuance
How It Is Usually Captured	Surveys	Interviews Focus Groups Arts-Informed Methods



We encourage you to mix methods. Pairing numbers with stories gives you, your partners, and your funders a fuller picture of what is changing and why.

Creating and deploying evaluation tools that capture the link between your work and outcomes

Surveys

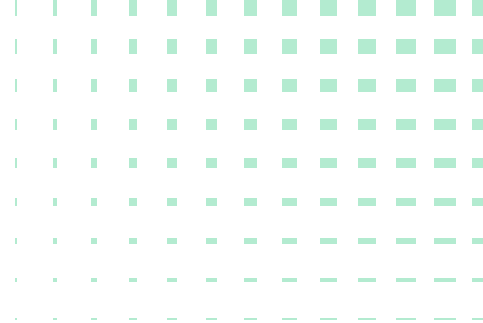
- Developing good survey questions can be more difficult than it seems. “Good” survey questions provide us with accurate and useful information.
- Ensure that they are questions that people will be willing to answer and will answer truthfully. It’s common for people to want to be “socially desirable.” Social desirability refers to the tendency of people to answer questions in a way that they think will be viewed favorably by others, rather than giving completely honest responses. In surveys or interviews, this can mean respondents might exaggerate positive behaviors (like saying they exercise more than they do) or downplay negative ones (like denying unhealthy habits) to look good, fit social norms, or avoid judgment.
- Pretest, Pretest, Pretest! Running the questions by your co-workers, a couple of program participants, your friends, or even your mom can reveal misunderstandings or unintended biases before the survey is fully deployed.
- Create questions that are clear, specific, and consistently interpreted to avoid confusion. You’re likely to be posing the same question to multiple people and everybody should interpret in the same way.
- Make sure your question can be answered with information that people easily have on hand. Think about questions related to something you did last week or last month. Do you remember what you had for breakfast last Tuesday? We don’t!
- Only ask one question at a time. Avoid a double-barreled question like “How satisfied are you with your pay and your work environment?”
- Be careful that the words you use don’t bias a response. Consider the Affordable Care Act a.k.a. ObamaCare as an example. They are one in the same but if you ask about ObamaCare you get biases related to political affiliation. If you use Affordable Care Act a lot of those biases disappear.

Creating and deploying evaluation tools that capture the link between your work and outcomes

Interviews

- Interviews are one of the most flexible and revealing tools available in data collection. Unlike surveys, which capture responses within a fixed structure, interviews create space for participants to share their experiences in their own words – offering depth, context, and meaning that numbers alone cannot convey. They are particularly well-suited to the intersection of arts, health, and well-being, where the most important outcomes are often personal, relational, and difficult to quantify.
- Be clear about your goals and develop a plan, an interview guide, and a protocol to guide your efforts.
- Choose a setting that's very comfortable for your participants (this can be in-person or online). Think about the kind of space where they're going to be most likely to feel comfortable and share real and valid information with you.
- When it comes time to administering the actual interview, stick to your script! You've developed that interview guide for a reason. Follow it closely and don't deviate to the best extent possible. You'll need consistency when you aggregate your findings.
- While you're conducting your interviews, don't hesitate to ask for clarity if needed. If you ask a question and you don't really understand the answer from your interviewee, ask for clarity. That's different from going off script. Asking for clarity if/when you need it ensures you have the information that you'll need later on in the process to conduct your analysis.
- Last but not least, try to record or transcribe your interviews. You do need to get consent from your program participants and most of the time they say yes. It's important that you have an accurate (i.e. solid and factual) transcription that you can refer to during your data analysis.
- Pretest and Practice! Conducting interviews isn't always easy (especially when you are new to administering them) and the more comfortable you are, the more open your participants will be to sharing.

Creating and deploying evaluation tools that capture the link between your work and outcomes



Focus Groups

- The group dynamic is the point! Focus Groups are facilitated group discussions (typically with six to 10 people) that capture a group's collective views. Unlike individual interviews, which capture one person's perspective at a time, focus groups are designed to generate discussion among participants, allowing ideas, reactions, and experiences to surface through dialogue and interaction.
- Think about the facilitator. An ideal facilitator should be a non-judgmental listener, familiar with the informal and formal power and social structures within the participants but they should not be a participants at the time of conducting the focus groups.
- Be purposeful about your recruitment and make sure that you have put together a group who are comfortable sharing amongst one another. There are always contextual factors in any group - think about power differentials or other group dynamics that may inhibit some people from speaking up.
- As with interviews, the setting can affect participants' comfort level in discussing particular topics. For example, participants may give guarded responses to questions about teenage pregnancy if the setting is a church meeting room or school. Also, if you're conducting a focus group in a space where participants have been, consider any factors that may temporarily affect the aura or atmosphere of a particular setting.
- If you're pulling current program participants together, assure that their input will remain confidential and will not affect their current or future participation in any way. Always make it clear to others in the room - especially those who know each other - to keep the group discussion confidential.
- If you're running online focus group be extremely comfortable with the technology: technical glitches can easily disrupt the energy and quickly erode participant's confidence in the process.
- Pretest and Practice! Practice drawing people out. In group settings (especially online group settings) some people can be more hesitant to speak up. Practice using techniques like calling on people by name, using the chat as a way for quieter participants to contribute, posing direct but open-ended follow-up questions, and using brief pauses intentionally to create space for responses.

Creating and deploying evaluation tools that capture the link between your work and outcomes

Arts-Informed Methods

Arts-informed methods treat creative expression itself as a form of evidence. Rather than asking participants to describe their experience with numbers or words, these approaches invite them to show it. These are particularly well-suited to participants who may find conventional survey or interview formats limiting, and to outcomes that resist easy verbal articulation.

They are fun and we encourage you to explore more and be creative.

Photovoice

Combines photography with narrative to visually document personal experiences
[Learn more from the experts at Johns Hopkins University.](#)

Collaborative Mapping

A participatory technique where participants work together to visually map out program outcomes
[Learn more from the experts with the American Evaluation Association.](#)

Creating and deploying evaluation tools that capture the link between your work and outcomes

Additional Resources

There are a lot of powerful and free resources available to help you capture information and hone your data collection skills.

Minnesota State Arts Board

On-demand trainings about quantitative and quantitative analysis available on the [Arts Board website](#).

The Community Toolbox Developed by the University of Kansas

A comprehensive resource for non-profits organizations that details evaluation methodology. [Dive in to Chapter 38.](#)

Survey Tools Abound

Microsoft Forms, Google Forms, and SurveyMonkey all offer free tools to easily assemble, distribute, and partially analyze online surveys.

Good, old fashioned pen and paper surveys also do the job (and may be preferable to your program participants).

Interview and Focus Group Guides Do Not

More of an art than a science, there is no one way to approach this. The best interview or focus group guide is one that feels natural to ask and honest to your program's goals.

Section 4

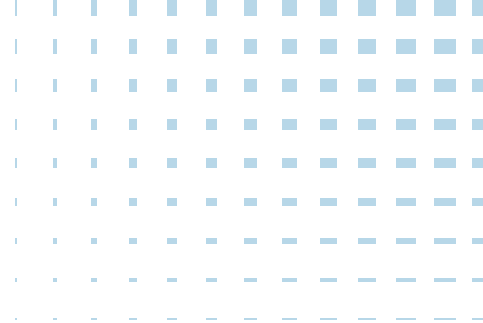
Make Sense Of It All

AT A GLANCE

Accessible methods for interpreting and analyzing your survey data

- Approaches for interpreting and analyzing your interview and focus group data

Accessible methods for interpreting and analyzing your survey data



Data analysis doesn't have to be complicated to be credible. For most arts organizations, the goal isn't methodological rigor and sophistication. Stive for honest, clear answers to the question: did something change, and does it matter?

Survey Data



Start simple. For closed-ended or scaled questions (like a 1-5 rating), basic descriptive statistics are usually enough: averages, percentages, and frequency counts tell a clear story without requiring advanced software. Free tools like Microsoft Forms and Google Forms automatically generate basic summaries and charts as responses come in, which means the analysis is largely built into the collection process. For slightly more analytical power, Microsoft Excel and Google Sheets can produce charts, averages, and cross-tabulations without any cost.



Look for patterns. You are not trying to prove causation, you are trying to identify consistent patterns that support your program's story. If 80% of participants report feeling more connected after your program, that is meaningful and worth communicating, even without a control group or statistical significance test.



Group into themes. For open-ended responses, read through all responses first to get a general sense of the data, then group similar responses into themes. This is called thematic analysis, and it requires no special software, just careful reading, a notepad, and a willingness to let the themes emerge from what participants actually said rather than what you expected to hear.



Be transparent about your limitations. A small sample, a single data collection point, or the absence of a comparison group are all worth naming honestly. Funders and stakeholders respect transparency, and acknowledging what your data can and can't show is itself a mark of rigor.

Approaches for interpreting and analyzing your interview and focus group data

Interview Data



Start by listening or reading carefully. Before reaching for themes or conclusions, sit with the data. Read through all your transcripts or notes in full before analyzing any of them. This first pass is about familiarizing yourself with the whole. Notice what surprises you, what repeats, and what feels significant.



Look for patterns across interviews. Once you've read everything, start looking for themes that appear across multiple conversations. You're not looking for unanimity (one powerful outlier can be as meaningful as a repeated pattern) but you are looking for threads that connect individual experiences into something larger.



Name your themes genuinely. Good thematic analysis stays close to what participants actually said. If three people independently described feeling "seen" during your program, that word belongs in your findings. Let the language of your participants lead. Don't translate their experience into jargon before it has a chance to speak for itself.



Direct quotes are valuable assets. As you read, pull out the phrases and sentences where a participant named something precisely, unexpectedly, or with particular feeling. These quotes will anchor your analysis and make your findings credible and communicable to others.



Free tools worth knowing. Transcription services like Otter.ai offer free tiers that can save significant time converting recorded interviews to text. Zoom also does a good job. Word or Google Docs work perfectly well for annotation and note-taking and a simple spreadsheet with participant responses organized by question can make this process much more manageable.



Small sample sizes are OK! It is common for arts organizations to conduct only a handful of interviews (five, eight, ten). That is enough. You are not trying to achieve statistical generalizability; you are trying to understand experience with honesty and depth. Do your best to capture diverse perspectives, be transparent about your sample size, present your findings as illustrative rather than definitive, and let the quality of your evidence speak for itself.

Approaches for interpreting and analyzing your interview and focus group data

Focus Group Data (Similar To Interview Data With A Few Key Differences)



Start with the group, not just the individuals. Before pulling out individual quotes or themes, ask yourself: what happened in this conversation? Where did energy build? Where was there tension or disagreement? What ideas seemed to emerge from the group rather than from any single person? Focus groups are designed to generate collective meaning, and your analysis should honor that.



Capture both content and dynamic. As you review your notes or transcript, track not just what was said but how. Did a theme emerge because one strong voice named it, or because multiple participants independently arrived at it? Did someone say something that shifted the direction of the conversation? These dynamics are data, and they add texture and credibility to your findings.



Name what the group produced together. Some of the most valuable findings from focus groups are things no individual participant could have generated alone. This could be a shared realization, a collective story, a moment of recognition that visibly moved the room. These are worth capturing and naming explicitly in your analysis, because they speak directly to community-level outcomes that other methods can't easily reach.



Try to have a co-facilitator or note-taker join the conversation. Compare your independent impressions before analyzing the data together often surfaces things neither would have caught alone. Focus group data, in particular benefits, from analysis with at least two people who were in the room (on online) and can account for tone, body language, and group energy that a transcript won't fully capture.



Small sample sizes are still OK! One to three focus groups is a reasonable range for most arts organizations. More isn't always better and what matters is that your groups are composed thoughtfully, facilitated consistently, and analyzed honestly. As always, be transparent about your scope and present your findings as meaningful rather than definitive.

CLOSING

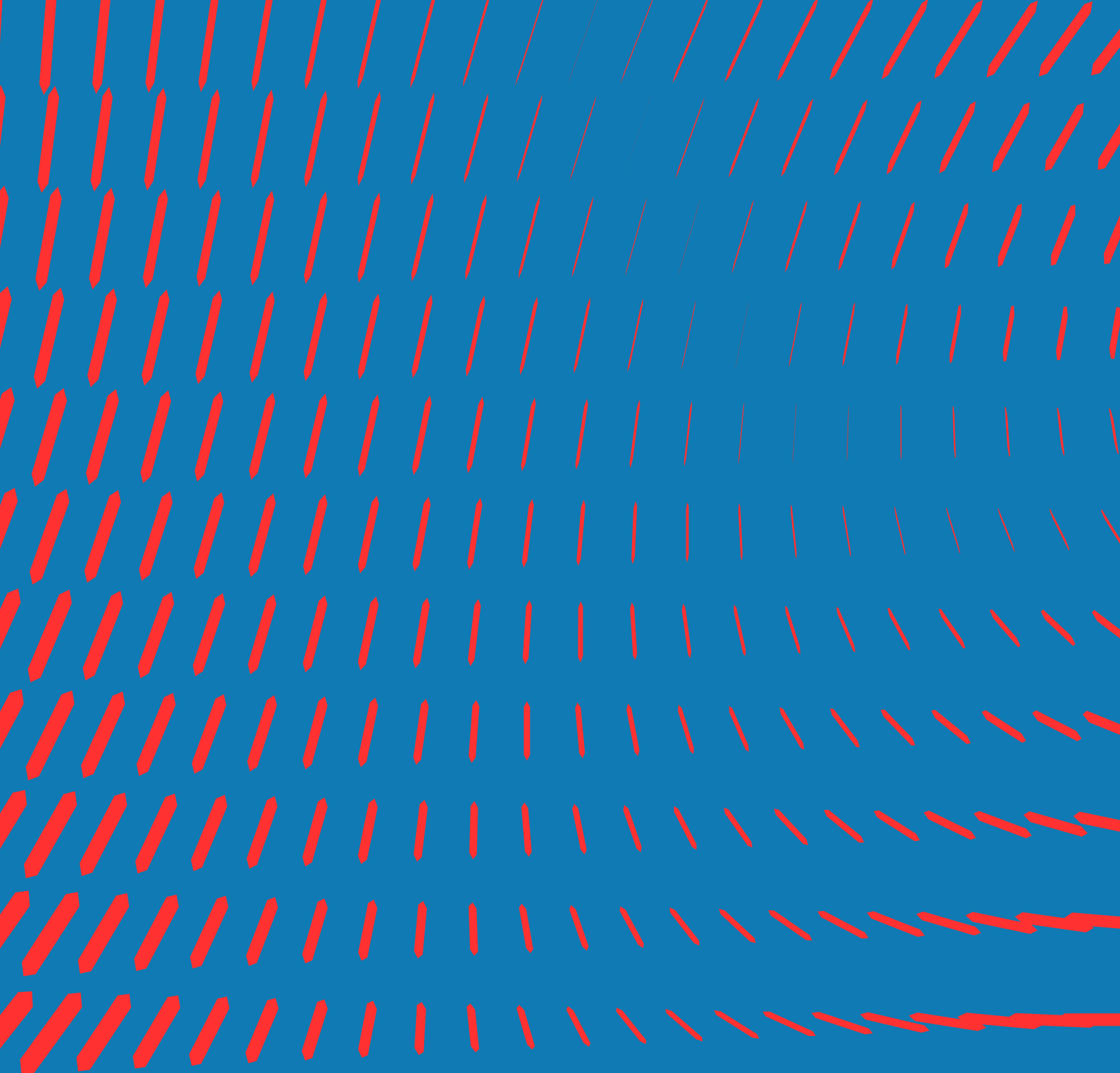
This toolkit is a starting point, not a finish line for your evaluation efforts. We especially encourage you to put the outcomes library to work: pilot it with your programs, adapt the language to fit your community, and expand on what we've started here. The more organizations that engage with these outcomes, the richer and more useful this work becomes for everyone.

We'd love to hear what you learn. As you apply this framework, please share your findings with us. We'd love to learn what worked, what you modified, and what outcomes you discovered that aren't yet captured here. Your experience in the field is essential to strengthening this library over time, and we are actively looking to incorporate new voices and evidence into future iterations.

If you're ready to get started or want support applying this framework to your work, we're here to help. Reach out to the Arts Board's Director of Research & Evaluation (Jeffrey.Niblack@arts.state.mn.us) to connect with technical assistance, learn about upcoming trainings, and explore external partnerships. In addition, Arts Board grantees also have access to a library of survey instruments, interview guides, and focus group guides. Please contact the Director of Research & Evaluation to request a copy.

Finally, a heartfelt thank you to the Arts Board grantee organizations whose participation made this initiative possible. This toolkit exists because of your openness, your time, and your belief that the arts and well-being are deeply connected. We built this with you, and we look forward to continuing that work together.

Arts Center of Saint Peter
Cornerstone
Giving Voice
International Cello Institute
Kairos Alive
Reach for Resources
Stages Theatre Company
Twin Cities Dance Center
Velvet Tones



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