

# Introduction

by **Brad Erickson**

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I first encountered the tenets behind this study as I was breakout surfing at the 2007 National Arts Marketing Project (NAMPP) Conference in Miami. I was leaning against a room divider at the back of a session, trying to assess the merits of staying here or moving on. At the front, on a large screen, flashed multi-color charts—the kind of charts one expects to see at a national conference—and at the podium stood a man I would learn was Alan Brown. Alan was reporting on the findings from his recently completed national study commissioned by a cohort of university presenters. Through a mix of factors—*aesthetic growth, social bonding, intellectual and emotional engagement*—Brown was describing how he assessed the effect of the various productions on their audiences. He was purporting to have measured, to have quantified, the intrinsic impact of the art. I stared at the screen. I double-checked my conference program. I stared back at the screen, looked at Alan, and thought, “You’re measuring what?”

I had been introduced to this phrase, “the intrinsic impact of the arts experience,” just that previous spring, lying by a pool in Palm Springs, reading the then-newly released RAND study *Gifts of the Muse*. Poring through it, I came upon a passage that described how for years, advocates trying to describe the value of the arts had “borrowed language from the social sciences” and focused on what they hoped everyone could agree had value.

“The arts,” the authors asserted, “are said to improve test scores... to be good for business and a stimulus to the tourist industry... They are even said to be a mechanism for urban revitalization.” The arguments of the day sought to justify the arts through their worthy, but ultimately secondary, instrumental benefits. But, the authors emphasized, “people are not drawn to the arts for their instrumental effects, but because the arts can provide them with meaning and with a distinctive type of pleasure and emotional stimulation.” What we needed to be studying and talking about were the deep intrinsic impact of the arts.

I slammed the book down on the patio tile and reflexively cried, “Yes!” Which drew glances from the other hotel guests. And which also left me immediately wondering how was I going to stand before lawmakers in Sacramento or San Francisco’s City Hall and cite, with a straight face, what the authors claimed were the arts’ truest benefits: “captivation” and “pleasure.”

Just a few years earlier, California had slashed funding for the arts by 97%. Around the country, we were watching the arts lose support from government and private sources alike—and many of us surmised that the traditional arguments were not making the case. We had been trying to describe the sun and could speak only of the corona—the halo of test scores and economic activity that surround the bright center of the arts. We had no means to assess the thing itself. And there was Alan, standing at a podium, telling us that it was, in fact, possible to measure—not just wax poetical about—the glowing orb of the arts experience. This was exciting.

After the NAMP session, I pressed my way over to Brown, pumped his hand and got his card. A year later, with support from the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Theatre Bay Area commissioned WolfBrown to conduct a pilot study looking into the intrinsic impact Free Night of Theater performances on audiences here in the Bay Area, and the intriguing results and the enthusiasm of our region’s theatre community (80 companies volunteered to participate in the study) made us eager to pursue this line of inquiry more deeply. As a service organization, we value research of all kinds, but we are especially drawn to studies that can demonstrably advance the work of our members, to inquiries that can empower artists and administrators to move the field forward. By measuring the intrinsic impact of their work on their audiences, theatres were finding a new way to ask, and answer, a fundamental question, “What are we trying to do with this play, with this production, and are we doing it?”

We were eager to take the inquiry deeper, to push it further. What if we sat

down with a theatre's leaders before a production, talked about their thoughts around intrinsic impact, asked them to set goals, measured the results, and returned to reflect on the findings? What if we did this over an entire season? What if we conducted a national study, with 18 diverse theatres, in six major theatre centers across the country? What would we find?

You have in your hands what we found after two years of planning, research and analysis—the culmination of the largest research project we've ever overseen. We could not have done it alone.

In making this study possible, we are enormously grateful for the early and continued support of the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation and the leadership of Ben Cameron. We are humbled by a cohort of renowned funders who have joined together to back this work. And we are indebted to our fellow service organizations for their enthusiastic participation in the project.

We are amazed by the vision and intellectual rigor of Alan Brown, Rebecca Ratzkin and the whole research team of WolfBrown. We are enriched by the contributions of thinkers like Diane Ragsdale, Rebecca Novick and Arlene Goldbard. And we are inspired by the 18 theatres that dived into this work so enthusiastically (and the many more who contributed interviews), to their artistic directors and managing directors, the marketers and all the staff who executed the various parts of this research over many months.

Personally, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary commitment, tenacity and keen insight of Clay Lord, who has shepherded this sprawling project from its start through the publication of this report and beyond.

We hope to contribute to the national conversation on the meaning and value of the arts. We hope theatres across the country will find in this research a powerful tool for deepening the impact of their work on their audiences. And we hope that someday soon measuring the intrinsic impact of the art experience on the audience will become as commonplace—and as crucial—as counting box office receipts.

Because it's true what they say: what we measure is what we value.

