Philadelphia and Camden Cultural Participation Benchmark Project: Summary of the Final Report

Mark J. Stern
University of Pennsylvania, stern@sp2.upenn.edu

Susan C. Seifert
University of Pennsylvania, seiferts@upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/siap Benchmark

Part of the Arts and Humanities Commons, and the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

http://repository.upenn.edu/siap Benchmark/2

The Philadelphia and Camden Cultural Participation Benchmark Project: Final Report, prepared for the Knight Foundation, is available at:
http://repository.upenn.edu/siap Benchmark/

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/siap Benchmark/2
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.
Philadelphia and Camden Cultural Participation Benchmark Project: Summary of the Final Report

Abstract
This document is a summary of the 2005 final report of the Philadelphia and Camden Cultural Participation Benchmark Project. The summary outlines a resident and an organizational perspective as well as strategic challenges and opportunities to support the Knight Foundation goal of increasing cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden, NJ.

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Comments
The Philadelphia and Camden Cultural Participation Benchmark Project: Final Report, prepared for the Knight Foundation, is available at: http://repository.upenn.edu/siap_benchmark/
Philadelphia and Camden Cultural Participation Benchmark Project

SUMMARY
of the Final Report

June 2005

Prepared by
Mark J. Stern and Susan C. Seifert

The Benchmark Project was made possible by the generous support of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation. The views expressed are solely those of the authors.
I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the Philadelphia and Camden Cultural Participation Benchmark Project (hereafter the Benchmark Project) is to document the current state of cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden, New Jersey. These two urban communities have been chosen by the Knight Foundation for multi-year investment in order to broaden, deepen, and diversify resident participation in arts and cultural programs and events. The Benchmark Project will enable the Foundation to monitor progress towards its goal of increasing cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden.

Approach and Methodology

The Benchmark Project was a collaboration of three research partners that employed three methodologies in order to gain different perspectives on cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden. The three methods and partners were:

- focus group discussions, led by Research for Action (RFA), to uncover the meanings of and barriers to cultural participation among community residents;
- a community resident survey, led by Alan S. Brown/Audience Insight and field work conducted by the Point Breeze Performing Arts Center, to document the types of arts and cultural activities and current levels of adult participation; and
- small area participation estimates, led by the University of Pennsylvania Social Impact of the Arts Project (SIAP), to estimate the geographic distribution and characteristics of participation in formal cultural programs.

Five neighborhood clusters were identified for purposes of the research: in North Philadelphia—West, Central, and East—and in Camden—North and South. Data collection and analysis were conducted from February of 2004 to May of 2005.

The use of several methods to explore the same topic, called triangulation, enabled the research team to mitigate the biases and maximize the strengths of each. The research concluded with a series of briefings with cultural leaders to elicit their perspective on Benchmark Project findings.

II. COMMUNITY CULTURAL PARTICIPATION IN REGIONAL CONTEXT

This chapter examines patterns of cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden and compares them to regional patterns. Two sets of broader social forces bear directly on the dynamics of cultural participation in Philadelphia and similar metropolitan areas: the restructured cultural sector and the new urban realities of the 21st century.

The regional context of community cultural participation has a variety of elements. First, the presence of mainstream regional cultural providers in North Philadelphia and Camden is quite low; the likelihood that a resident of these neighborhoods will participate in a regional cultural organization is less than one-sixth that of the rest of the metropolitan area. The Benchmark cultural organizations, which are located in or serving North Philadelphia and Camden, attract levels of participation that demonstrate their significant role in the cultural life of these neighborhoods. Finally, the local Benchmark
organizations draw participants from outside of North Philadelphia and Camden into these neighborhoods.

**Regional and Benchmark cultural participation rates, by location, metropolitan Philadelphia**

![Bar chart showing cultural participation rates by location.](chart)

Source: Benchmark Project, small-area cultural participation database, 2004

The community cultural sector then plays two important roles in the regional cultural scene. On the one hand, it provides a level of cultural engagement in poor, urban neighborhoods that compensates for the relative absence of larger cultural organizations. On the other hand, community programs are a cultural asset for the entire region, providing cultural opportunities for residents of other neighborhoods that are not available elsewhere.

### III. NORTH PHILADELPHIA AND CAMDEN CULTURAL PARTICIPATION—A RESIDENT PERSPECTIVE

**Residents’ Beliefs**

The Benchmark Project conducted three focus groups in North Philadelphia and Camden to shed light on the meanings of cultural participation in these low-income urban neighborhoods in the Philadelphia region. Three important themes emerged from the focus group analysis:

- a wide range of activities were identified as ‘cultural participation,’ which was often described in terms of *markers of identity* and *experiences of public space*;
- a broad definition was used to describe who is an ‘artist’ and what is ‘art;’ and
- neighborhood context—physical and social—influences patterns of cultural participation.

Informants also identified a variety of barriers to participation, including: personal and community commitments, loss of neighborhood cultural resources; and youth culture.

Informants defined artists in a variety of ways, including: those who have creative skills or who express culture in their everyday lives; those who represent the African American experience; and community role models.
The focus group analysis highlights the wide range of activities that constitute cultural participation among residents; the varied places in which these activities take place—from traditional arts venues to activities in the home; and the connection of culture with ethnicity, one’s own heritage as well as others’. The study also found that the physical environment of the neighborhood influences the character of cultural participation.

**Residents’ Behavior**

The Benchmark Project conducted a door-to-door neighborhood survey to build a participation profile of adult residents of North Philadelphia and Camden. Respondents were asked about all types of arts and cultural activities as well as the social context or venue of activity. A total of 602 questionnaires were completed. The survey found:

- During the past year, nearly two-thirds of all respondents attended a live performance or art exhibit.
- During the past year, about 50 percent of all respondents attended ticketed music concerts and about 30 percent attended free concerts.

**Percent of residents who participated in specific cultural activities in past year, North Philadelphia and Camden**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play instrument (soc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play instrument at home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts visiting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing socially</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing at home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood musical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play or musical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood concert</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concert</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Benchmark Project, neighborhood resident survey, 2004

- Approximately 40 percent of all respondents reported that they sing. By contrast only 9 percent (54 of 602 respondents) said that they play a musical instrument.
- Respondents reported a variety of at-home cultural participation, including music-making, social dancing, reading and creative writing, visual arts, and craft-making. Other “living arts” included such activities as dressing creatively, home decorating, displaying art in the home, and gardening.
- About one-third of all respondents engaged in creative writing in the past year. The predominant mode of expression was “writing or performing poetry, rap, or
song lyrics.” This form was reported by 60 percent of all writers and 70 percent of male writers.

Cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden is really a three-part story. First, residents of these neighborhoods embrace broad and varied definitions of culture that include the arts as well as a variety of folk traditions and everyday activities. Second, residents participate in these activities regularly, usually at home, in religious settings, or commercial entertainment venues. Finally, formal nonprofit cultural organizations play a relatively minor role in the cultural life of these communities.

**IV. NORTH PHILADELPHIA AND CAMDEN CULTURAL PARTICIPATION—AN ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE**

This chapter examines variations in the cultural participation profile *within* North Philadelphia and Camden and asks if there are important socio-economic variables that explain this variation. We focus on four sub-indexes of individual participation—audience, artists, students, and mailing list members—as well as an index of organizational connections.

Artists and mailing list entries are more evenly distributed across the five areas, although North Philadelphia East and North Philadelphia Central have the highest rates. However, the other indexes show distinctive patterns across the five neighborhood clusters.

**Benchmark participants per 1,000 residents, North Philadelphia and Camden block groups**

![Benchmark map](image)

Source: Benchmark Project, small-area cultural participation estimates, 2004
The graph below shows participation profiles by neighborhood cluster, which highlight several findings:

- North Philadelphia Central clearly has the highest rate of audience participants.
- Students are strongly represented in both North Philadelphia East and North Philadelphia Central.
- Camden’s individual participant indexes are relatively low. However, Camden stands out due to very high levels of organizational connections, particularly in South Camden.

Cultural participants per 1,000 residents, by type of participation and neighborhood cluster, North Philadelphia and Camden

In order to understand the patterns of participation discovered by the small-area cultural participation estimates, we conducted a correlation analysis. Generally, socio-economic variables are not associated with variations in Benchmark participation indexes within North Philadelphia and Camden. For the overall individual participation index (an aggregate of audience, students, artists, and mailing lists), only a higher than average percent of college graduates in the area is correlated with participation, perhaps a product of the relatively high levels of participation around Temple University and the concentration of college-educated persons in the southern end of North Philadelphia Central. Other socio-economic variables fail to explain even one percent of the variation in overall individual Benchmark participation.

Although the standard socio-economic variables fail to have much power in explaining variation in participation, the presence of cultural organizations (within one-half mile of the block group) does. Its correlation coefficient of .186—although still relatively low—is three times stronger than the strongest socio-economic variable. The correlation between participation and the presence of cultural organizations is stronger for audiences (.280) and mailing list members (.207) but weaker for students and artists.
V. COMMUNITY CULTURAL PARTICIPATION 2004—WHAT WE LEARNED

This chapter first synthesizes the findings to see how the three studies converge or complement each other with respect to patterns of cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden. In other words, did our ‘triangulation’ strategy work? The three studies converged on several key community-wide findings.

- Residents of North Philadelphia and Camden are actively engaged in a variety of informal social and cultural activity close to home.
- North Philadelphia and Camden residents’ participation in cultural programs—both inside their neighborhoods and elsewhere in the region—is relatively low.
- Within these broad patterns of cultural participation, there is considerable variation. Neighborhood context matters. Even in poor urban neighborhoods, geography and history account for perceptible and measurable differences in participation.
- The texture of community cultural participation reflects, in part, the demographic character and the changing social and physical landscape of the neighborhood.
- The level of formal cultural participation—in both community-based and regional programs—reflects a history of community building by local institutions. Of particular significance is the number of cultural providers located within and in proximity to a resident’s immediate neighborhood.

The second section presents the cultural practitioners’ response to the research. Overall, the Benchmark Project findings on community participation resonated with both the Philadelphia and Camden community cultural directors in the practitioner focus groups and research briefing. The research reflects “what we see on a regular basis, what we knew instinctively but couldn’t articulate.”

The Benchmark Project was designed to meld a variety of perspectives into a coherent understanding of the current state of cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden. This chapter suggests that, for the most part, the separate results inform and complement each other. In addition, the response of cultural leaders to the findings suggests that the Benchmark Project reinforced practitioners’ perceptions of the opportunities and challenges to increasing cultural participation in these communities.

VI. STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

What is the current state of cultural participation in North Philadelphia and Camden, and how might we expand it? Answering this question has been the central focus of the Benchmark Project.

In many respects, the cultural life of North Philadelphia and Camden is strong. Our informants tell us that if we use a wide-angle lens to view culture—one that includes patterns of everyday life—these communities have diverse and rich patterns of social interaction and private cultural expression. The home, the family, traditions and religious observance, and informal social interaction are the foundations of cultural life in these two urban communities. The study suggests that this foundation is strong.
At the same time, the strength of the informal cultural life of North Philadelphia and Camden does not carry over to its formal nonprofit cultural sector. From a regional perspective, formal participation rates in these neighborhoods are strikingly low. Although local community arts centers and cultural resource organizations—what we have called the Benchmark organizations—partially compensate for these shortcomings, these groups are modest in size and budget.

The Cultural Ecosystem—Nodes and Links

As the Knight initiative moves forward, it is critical that its success be judged with an eye toward both the assets and shortcomings of North Philadelphia and Camden’s current cultural scene. The assets identified by the Benchmark Project are:

- a vital and diverse informal cultural scene; and
- a community cultural sector with a history of providing cultural opportunities in these two communities.

The shortcomings that need to be addressed include:

- weak links between the informal cultural scene and the community arts nonprofits;
- a minor neighborhood role played by regional cultural organizations; and
- uneven development of the cultural ‘ecosystems’ of North Philadelphia and Camden.
The stakes involved in strengthening the community cultural sector are significant. In a world in which issues of identity represent an important element of social life, the absence of cultural opportunities can demoralize an entire community in ways that move well beyond the cultural sector. Although there are many features of the new urban reality that provide reason to be optimistic about the future of urban culture, the realities of economic inequality and the marketization of the cultural sector fuel pessimism.

Knowledge of the current situation and an understanding of its dynamics are important. The Benchmark Project believes that it has provided this foundation. But knowledge is no substitute for motivation and action to bring about social change. This is a challenge to which we must all respond.