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Think Local! An Interview with Randy Cohen and Michael Killoren

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When it comes to supporting the arts in America, we know that there are as many different strategies as there are communities. At the core of all of them, however, is the local arts agency (LAA). Broadly defined as an organization or program that works to foster and support the entire arts industry within a community, LAAs can take many forms—public or private, full time staff or all-volunteer operations, standalone or functioning under



Randy Cohen



Michael Killoren

the umbrella of a different agency, and beyond. No matter what shape they take, LAAs seek to support all of the arts for all of the people within a community—a key component of our mission at Americans for the Arts. That is why we have, in close partnership with the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), chosen to undertake the 2013-14 Census of Local Arts Agencies. This comprehensive survey is designed to benchmark the financial health and programmatic trends of the richly varied, highly diverse, and extremely important work of the nation's 5,000 LAAs and the communities that they serve. The data collection will commence in early 2014, so make sure you keep an eye out for our dedicated LAA Census webpage, coming soon!

Here to answer some of our burning questions about the survey—why it is so important, what we hope to learn, and how we plan on using the data—are two of the driving forces behind its conception: Randy Cohen, Vice President of Research & Policy at Americans for the Arts, and Michael Killoren, Local Arts Agencies and Challenge America Director at the National Endowment for the Arts. (Note: an abridged version of this interview was published in [Arts Link](#), the quarterly membership publication of Americans for the Arts.)

Americans for the Arts Research Dept (AFTA Research): The NEA has made a significant investment in this research. Why is this work important to the agency?

Michael Killoren: A thorough understanding of America's support system for the arts is incomplete without knowledge of the role of Local Arts Agencies, nationwide. We have current, comprehensive data on federal and state investment in the arts – this study will complete that picture, and help the American people better understand the role of LAAs in the nation's arts infrastructure, as well as their contributions to the cultural vibrancy of the nation.

AFTA Research: Americans for the Arts has represented Local Arts Agencies for more than 50 years. Why this survey NOW, and how will it be different than the many conducted in the past?

Killoren: The field has changed dramatically over the past 50 years, and there have been tremendous advances in data collection methods that were unheard of twenty years ago. One of the biggest challenges in collecting data from LAAs is that no two entities are alike. However, reporting standards are now in place that make it possible to create stronger alignment with federal and state data. Combined with advances in internet technology and communication, a truly comprehensive, nationwide census (rather than sampling) is now feasible.

Randy Cohen: True! Change happens quickly in this world and these field-wide studies enable us to track those changes. In the early 1990s, just 20 percent of LAAs were using the arts to address social, educational, and economic development issues. As the decade passed we saw that figure skyrocket into the 80 percent range. It was the tracking of these trends that led us to undertake research efforts such as *Coming Up Taller* and the *YouthARTS Project* or the *Cultural Districts Handbook*.

AFTA Research: What makes Local Arts Agencies such an important constituency to study?

Cohen: LAAs are at the forefront of building healthier communities through the arts. They lead the way with partnerships with non-arts agencies, find funding from non-traditional sources, provide "gap programming" to underserved elements of a community. All of that creates new opportunities for local arts organizations and artists—and especially the public they serve.

Killoren: Most LAAs with grant programs support organizations and individual artists, and many of these agencies have connections with other funders in their community. We estimate that LAA investment exceeds federal and state investment combined. The LAA census project will provide better data to illuminate these relationships.

AFTA Research: How do Americans for the Arts and the NEA plan to use the data collected?

Killoren: The NEA's goal is to make this data widely accessible to the public via the NEA's website—and to make this data freely available to other researchers, in the hope that it will stimulate greater interest in the field, and generate more in-depth analysis of the LAA sector.

Cohen: Out of those projects I mentioned, such as *Coming Up Taller* and many like them, come publications, advocacy tools, and training programs that we use to advance the arts in communities everywhere. Pending OMB approval, we will be distributing the survey to the field after the holidays—so we're looking to get some preliminary findings back out the door by spring of next year.

AFTA Research: What is your most compelling question that you hope will be answered by the survey?

Cohen: We are taking a Mighty Susquehanna River approach to the survey: "Mile Wide, and a Foot Deep!" That is, we are going to learn about many different aspects of LAAs, but apart from budgets, not dive particularly deep during this round of inquiry. This will enable us to (a) paint a rich picture of LAAs with their distinct similarities and differences as well as position us to do more detailed rounds of follow-up, and (b) keep the reporting burden down and our survey compliance rates UP (i.e., what keeps me awake at nights).

Killoren: The most important aspect of the census is establishing baseline data, which will provide a foundation for future updates. The goal is to update the census every three years. A scholarly paper will accompany the baseline data, providing an opportunity to take a deeper dive into some of the findings. But from the perspective of a LAA leader, I think the most compelling question will be, "How do I fit in?"

For more information on Local Arts Agencies at Americans for the Arts, please visit our Local Arts Advancement page [here](#). For more on Research at Americans for the Arts, click [here](#). And don't forget to check back on our LAA Census page, coming soon, for more information as we approach the 2014 release!
