

Fostering Thriving Arts Organizations And Communities

An Interview with Zannie Giraud Voss, PhD, Director, SMU DataArts

EDITORS' NOTE Zannie Giraud Voss is Director of SMU DataArts, as well as Professor of Arts Management and Arts Entrepreneurship in the Meadows School of the Arts and the Cox School of Business at Southern Methodist University. Prior to joining the SMU faculty, she was a professor at Duke University in Theatre Studies and the Fuqua School of Business. At Duke, she also served as producing director of Theater Previews, developing and co-producing over a dozen new plays and musicals, two of which transferred to Broadway. Before transitioning to academia, Voss served as managing director of PlayMakers Repertory Company, associate manager of the Alley Theatre, and assistant director of Audience Development at the Mark Taper Forum. She has served as a consultant for the Irvine Foundation, Theatre Development Fund, Philadelphia Theatre Initiative/Theatre Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Theatre Communications Group, co-authoring Theatre Facts since 1998. Voss earned her doctorate at Aix-Marseille III Graduate School of Management, IAE, France.



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actionable insights shared directly with arts practitioners. Its programs provide business intelligence tools and resources to help arts leaders leverage data to answer critical management questions and connect research analyses to their own work. Recent publications include research reports on emergence from the COVID-19 crisis; the alchemy that drives high-performing arts organizations of color; audience diversity, equity, and inclusion in large performing arts organizations; impact of investments made in diverse creative communities, and more.

Will you provide an overview of SMU DataArts and how you define its mission?

SMU DataArts, a national center for arts research, exists to provide and engage organizations and individuals with the evidence-based insights needed to collectively build strong, vibrant, and equitable arts communities.

Will you highlight SMU DataArts' programs?

It is important to me that we connect arts and cultural organizations to their communities in the data since the two are inextricably tied in reality. To provide the evidence-based insights core to our mission, we have created and maintain a data model of the nation's arts and culture ecosystem. It is one of the nation's largest and most unique arts data sets, and the fuel for our programs.

We have five main categories of major programs, all of which are geared to fostering thriving arts organizations and communities.

- First, we work with a network of foundations, government agencies, and national service organizations to collect financial, operating, attendance, and workforce data on arts and cultural organizations using a combination of surveying and existing data integration.

- Second, we conduct rigorous academic research using that data plus data on the communities in which arts organizations reside. This advances a broader canon of knowledge about arts management and marketing, cultural policy, and cultural economics while attracting top-notch researchers to work with us.

- Third, we publish self-initiated and commissioned applied research reports for arts leaders and the public that are focused on actionable insights. Our mantra is that when we learn, the arts field learns.

- Fourth, we create mass customized tools and dashboards out of what we have learned through the research. That way, we help those running arts organizations put their data to work.

- Fifth, we work hard to engage the arts field and those who care about the arts with our insights and tools. In 2023, our work was featured in over 60 articles by national and various local press outlets, including NPR's All Things Considered.

Will you discuss your work spearheading research efforts to help build strong, vibrant, and equitable arts communities across the U.S.?

To understand how to build strong, vibrant, and equitable arts communities, we need to first get a baseline of strengths and weaknesses to

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identify what can be celebrated, what areas need reinforcing, and where opportunities lie. A great example of how we publicly share this information is our annual report on the 40 most arts-vibrant communities in the country and its companion heat map, as well as an assessment of arts vibrancy by state.

I have the distinct privilege of working with an outstanding team of talented colleagues, each of whom brings a unique perspective and depth of expertise. We listen closely to arts leaders and arts funders who share with us first-hand their most pressing issues. We partner with them to answer questions we find to be of mutual interest. We learn from them about how research insights make sense and make a difference in their day-to-day experience. Over time, we have published more than 60 research reports on findings that illuminate the strength, vibrancy, and equitability of arts and culture in the U.S.

How critical is Equity, Diversity, Accessibility, and Inclusion (EDAI) to SMU DataArts’ culture and values?

EDAI is core to our culture and to how we show up in the world. SMU DataArts is committed to making research, tools, and resources accessible to everyone. We strive to conduct our work without bias or preference, and we value input and creativity from diverse perspectives. We prioritize data collection and research projects that celebrate the arts and culture of communities of color. In fact, we are in the midst of a project with the L.A. County Department of Arts and Culture examining how workforce diversity, equity, and perceptions of

inclusion impact job satisfaction, willingness to recommend the organization as a workplace, and intent to leave. And, to see where there’s room for improvement, we are working with The Acacia Company on an internal DEI operational audit.

Will you discuss SMU DataArts’ partnership with the Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events and Bloomberg Associates?

Chicago’s Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events (DCASE) and Bloomberg Associates are wonderful thought partners. DCASE has been a long-time user of our data collection platform as part of its grantmaking, which provides us with robust data on that city’s arts and cultural organizations. In 2021, Bloomberg Associates contracted us to work with DCASE to answer five research questions. DCASE leveraged findings generated from one of these research streams, A Comparative Analysis of Contributed Revenue: Chicago and 4 Markets, for a six-fold increase in the agency’s budget in 2022. We published findings from another project showing evidence that local arts agencies are catalysts for arts vibrancy, spurring higher numbers of arts employees and independent artists per capita in their communities.

Fast forward to 2023, and again we worked with DCASE to examine the health of many of the city’s arts and cultural organizations before, during, and emerging from the pandemic. This resulted in the report Navigating Recovery: Arts and Culture Financial and Operating Trends in Chicago.

You have been with SMU DataArts for 12 years. What has made the experience so special for you?

One of life’s great joys has been creating an entity that meets a need, then having others embrace and appropriate its mission, and now seeing it live on. There was no cross-disciplinary national research focused on the health of the arts and culture field 12 years ago when I co-founded SMU’s National Center for Arts Research, which we merged with DataArts to become SMU DataArts in 2018. It has been special to have Southern Methodist University’s confidence and support of this initiative, and to have so many people and organizational partners inspired by the use of data to foster thriving arts organizations and communities.

In courses I have taught on strategic planning, I emphasized that part of being a responsible leader at a certain point in your career means planning for your succession. Now it is time for me to practice what I’ve preached. I feel very proud of what we have built and accomplished with SMU DataArts, but I also believe that change is a good thing.

It is with a heart filled with gratitude that I will retire at the end of August 2024. I am very excited that Dr. Jen Benoit-Bryan, SMU DataArts’ illustrious Research Director, has agreed to take on the role of Director at that time. She is an outstanding leader and talented researcher who is well-respected in the field and brings fresh ideas. Nothing gives me greater pride than knowing that this organization will be entrusted to Jen and a team of gifted and accomplished individuals who are passionate about our mission. ●

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