



# The Art of Creating Positive Change

The arts have long been used to aid in healing, provide a means of expression, nurture academic growth, and build strong, cohesive communities.

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COMPAS, a well-established arts education nonprofit in Minnesota, understands the innate need for interaction with the arts and culture, and provides myriad artistic opportunities to help bridge gaps, restore a sense of connection, and help people cope with the trauma experienced worldwide in recent years.

# INTRODUCTION

## Leveraging creativity for good in a challenging world

The negative consequences of the last several years have been laid bare as we transition from the COVID-19 pandemic to living with the virus as an endemic concern. **We're learning to live in a new reality where divides must be bridged and connections restored.**

Children especially have been impacted by isolation on several fronts: mental wellness, academic readiness, and social inclusion. But people of all ages have endured traumas on a global scale — before and beyond the pandemic — including war, climate change, racism, sexism, and more. Not only do we continue to experience the lasting impacts of the pandemic within the healthcare landscape, but within the social landscape as well.



Today, when chasms and setbacks seem almost overwhelming, scientific research proves that creative opportunities aren't optional; they're necessary. COMPAS and other such arts education nonprofits offer a distinct advantage and opportunity to bring meaningful creative interactions to key stakeholder groups.

Moreover, these arts experiences help fulfill critical objectives:

improving mental wellness, enhancing academic performance, driving positive community outcomes and connections, and influencing social progress.

With that in mind, this white paper approaches the topic from four perspectives: the **Arts and Well-Being**, the **Arts and Academic Benefits**, the **Arts and Community**, and the **Arts and Social Progress**.

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**WE ARE ALL BORN *creative***

**BUT WE MUST WORK TO STAY THAT WAY.** 

WHEN WE INVEST IN PRESERVING THIS PART OF OUR MINDS, WE HOLD ON TO A PIECE OF OURSELVES THAT MAKES US BETTER SUITED TO NOT ONLY SURVIVE IN THIS WORLD, BUT **THRIVE.**

**OUR CREATIVITY *is precious***  

WE CAN'T SQUANDER IT. WE CAN'T DEFUND IT. WE CAN'T LET IT BECOME EXTRACURRICULAR. BECAUSE IT'S NOT. 

**IT IS ESSENTIAL *it's* ELEMENTAL HEALING, TEACHING LIFE-GIVING**   

# The Arts and Community



Exposure to, and participation in, the arts can be a great unifier, bringing together people of various backgrounds to help generate higher civic engagement and create positive outcomes in both rural and urban communities. The arts can also bring about greater interactions among people of different generations.



Organizations focused on arts and culture—like COMPAS—help establish and nurture relationships within and between age groups that encourage greater connections, deeper conversations, and shared experiences.

## The primary reasons Americans of all ages engage with the arts include:



To connect with others and to feel belonging



To learn something new



To feel a sense of accomplishment

## Bringing the generations together

In roughly one decade, for the first time in history, Americans aged 65 and older will outnumber those under age 18. And while their ages may differ, both groups share many of the same needs, priorities, and desires, requiring a reexamination of isolating, age-defined approaches to living.

**“Older and younger people are two of the loneliest groups in society,” says Marc Freedman, founder of [ensemble.org](https://www.ensemble.org), a nonprofit that aims to unite generations.**<sup>23</sup>



At multiple affordable housing developments in Los Angeles, for example, young and old residents live side by side, thriving in multiage communities and supporting one another in myriad ways. In some of the buildings, all residents are artists. At Ace 121, for example, resident Eva Kochikyan says her four-year-old has happily plunked down in the communal art studio next to an accomplished painter around 70 years old, and they both began painting. “No lecturing, just working together,” she says. ***“These connections happen naturally.”***



## Engaging older Americans in artistic pursuits

An approach focused on an individual's strengths and abilities is fertile ground for creativity and the arts. This holistic path helps foster optimal health and wellness, with awareness not only of the person's physical condition, but also of their mental, emotional, and spiritual needs.

The COMPAS program **Artful Aging™** introduces and teaches a variety of arts activities, including writing, painting, and sculpture, to older individuals—not only for the fun and richness that these experiences provide but for their health benefits. According to the National Endowment for the Arts, **people who practice the arts as they age need fewer doctors' appointments and less medicine, and have higher morale, lower rates of depression, and fewer memory problems.**



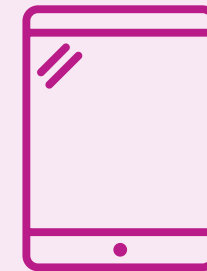
***“COMPAS works so hard to bring high-quality, artistic experiences to populations that wouldn't normally have access,”*** says COMPAS teaching artist Anne Krocak, who often works with older adults and has led such projects as creating community murals.

According to one COMPAS student, Barbara Coffin, ***“[Painting with watercolors] just encourages us to let go, try things, and be ourselves.”*** Arlene Laito, another student, agrees: ***“COMPAS gives you a tremendous opportunity to grow at this stage of life.”***



## Employing digital activities to connect and inspire

Hands-on activities aren't always an option. For homebound older adults, nursing home residents, and people of all ages who simply like the convenience of learning from home, online creative and cultural activities provide meaningful ways to connect with others, find personal fulfillment, and expand their understanding of our shared world.



***Digital arts programming can be a powerful tool*** for anyone, providing accessible opportunities to learn and experience new things—and to express themselves creatively. The San Diego Museum of Art, for example, offers online activities, including drawing exercises, crepe paper flower making, writing prompts, videos, podcasts, and more.



Older adults recognize the vital role arts organizations play in enriching and supporting their communities. Seniors Art Link, based in Ontario, is a digital arts project created by local arts centers and seniors themselves. According to their website, ***“The goal is to develop an online community of creative adults 55+ to learn new skills and share joyful experiences with like-minded peers.”***

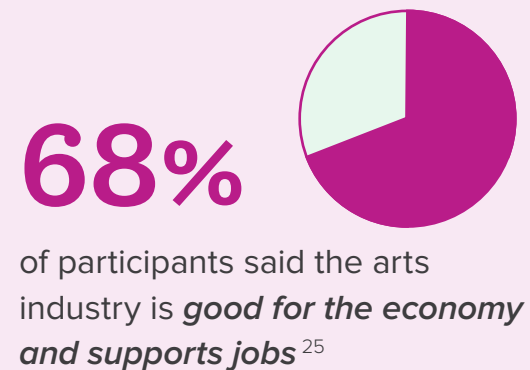
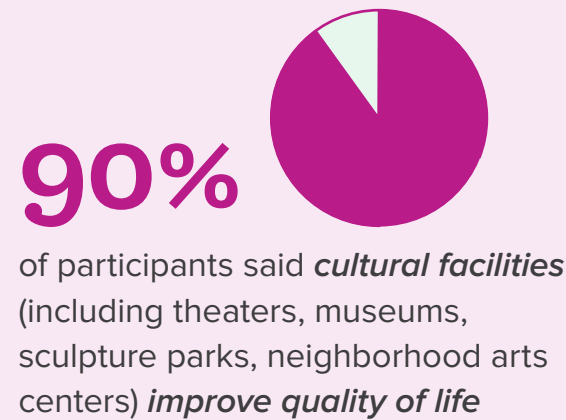


Finally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when museum visits weren't a possibility, the Harvard ARTZ organization developed the Interactive Virtual Museum, which made art exhibits available online to help ***“reduce feelings of loneliness in older residents by engaging them with art and facilitating conversations about the exhibits.”***<sup>24</sup>

## Creating positive outcomes in community

While it often seems Americans can't agree on much these days, the majority of people in the United States believe in the benefits of arts within their communities.

As reported in a 2018 survey:



Meanwhile, University of Pennsylvania researchers have demonstrated that a high concentration of the arts in a city leads to higher civic engagement, more social cohesion, higher child welfare, and lower poverty rates.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the presence of an active cultural sector can be considered an essential part of a livable neighborhood.



## Creating connected communities with COMPAS

Access to cultural resources is widely recognized as playing a key role in creating healthy, connected communities. In fact, exposure to and participation in the arts can be a great unifier, bringing people of various backgrounds and ages together to help generate higher civic engagement and create positive outcomes in both rural and urban communities.

COMPAS, for example, partners with libraries to bring teaching artists to communities across Minnesota. Teaching artists also hold programs at community centers and other sites. Attendees might catch a performance of Haitian dancing, Carnatic music from South India, or African drumming. Workshops include performing poetry, dyeing scarves, creating digital animations, and more.

COMPAS teaching artists hail from more than 40 countries and possess a deep understanding of cultural knowledge and art forms. When they teach, they share their art, their history, and their life experiences. Plus, they contextualize art forms so participants more fully understand the American experience in all its wonderful diversity.



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