



Creative Aging in NYC

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for Healthy Aging

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OVERVIEW

The blossoming field of creative aging promotes opportunities for older adults to engage in the arts through community-based programs. Evidence supports many benefits of creative aging—for older adults who participate, the institutions that provide it, and the neighborhoods in which it occurs.

The New York Community Trust funded the New York City Creative Aging Initiative, a two-year collaboration among Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging, Lifetime Arts, and LiveOn NY, to strengthen and advance the field of creative aging in the city, with a focus on the SU-CASA arts program. SU-CASA has grown from a seed in 2010 to be the largest public participatory arts program for older adults in the United States. Funded by the New York City Council and administered by the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) and the Department for the Aging (DFTA), SU-CASA provides grants to artists and cultural organizations to bring stimulating interactive arts programs to senior centers and other senior-serving organizations across the five boroughs. Participants work for weeks on songs, dances, stories, paintings, and more, then share their art with the community through a performance or exhibition.

Brookdale’s team conducted a two-year field analysis of SU-CASA and used the findings to help develop recommendations. The evidence brings us to four salient conclusions:

- Creative aging is a natural for NYC, an art-happy city with a built-in structure for arts education in its 250+ senior centers and 200+ library branches.
- Participants rave about creative aging programs and their benefits—and some research supports their perceptions.
- Older adults at all senior-serving organizations deserve SU-CASA at its best. SU-CASA’s reach is tremendous, but not all senior centers have the resources they need to implement it successfully.
- With robust success so far, yet with room for improvement, SU-CASA is ready for an infrastructure upgrade.

Recommendations center on three areas:

- **Infrastructure.** SU-CASA needs a single entity charged with providing administrative support to the City Council, DCLA, and DFTA, as well as the borough arts councils, cultural organizations, and senior centers implementing it. No single office currently oversees program-wide coordination, training needs, procedures, budgeting guidelines, or marketing.
- **Equity.** Improving the infrastructure is particularly important for senior centers and cultural organizations that are smaller, that have fewer resources, or that are newer to SU-CASA and creative aging. Attention should focus on ensuring that all centers and organizations can make the most of the opportunity SU-CASA provides.
- **Integration into the city arts ecosystem.** Strengthening creative aging in NYC calls for raising the profile of SU-CASA and fostering wider engagement with potential partners.

New York City is already a leader in creative aging. The city’s SU-CASA program offers exuberant evidence of this: participants love it and attest to the difference it makes in their lives. This is an ideal time to build on SU-CASA’s success and help creative aging to expand and thrive in NYC.

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INTRODUCTION

Art and creativity can foster a life of joy, growth, and fulfillment. For older adults, creative expression is a way to share their stories, discover their untapped potential or continue their life's work, and make a contribution to their communities. Participating in a community arts program—writing, painting, singing, acting, weaving, dancing, drawing—can help older adults remain active, strengthen their social connections, and be happier and healthier.

The purpose of this report, from Hunter College's Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging, is to promote the evidence for the benefits of creative aging—for older adults who participate, institutions that provide it (cultural organizations, senior centers, and others), and neighborhoods in which it occurs. The report is a product of the New York City Creative Aging Initiative, a two-year collaboration (2018-2019) among Brookdale, Lifetime Arts, and LiveOn NY. The New York Community Trust funded the initiative to strengthen and advance the field of creative aging in New York City, with a focus on the SU-CASA arts program.

Funded by the New York City Council, SU-CASA is the largest public participatory arts program for older adults in the United States. SU-CASA provides grants to artists and cultural organizations to bring stimulating interactive arts programs to senior centers (and other senior-serving organizations) across the five boroughs of New York City. Participants engage in a focused creative project designed by the teaching artists or cultural organizations as a 40- or 60-hour program (usually 12 to 16 weeks) and work toward a public event, where they share their work with the community through a performance or exhibition.

New York City's Department for the Aging (DFTA) and Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) and the arts councils of the five boroughs work with cultural organizations, teaching artists, and senior centers to make SU-CASA happen. The agencies and arts councils recognize the program's benefit to older adults and the importance of ensuring that the city's abundant artistic resources reach New Yorkers of all ages and in all neighborhoods.

THE NYC CREATIVE AGING INITIATIVE

Over the course of the NYC Creative Aging Initiative, Brookdale and its partners have worked to understand and support the SU-CASA program as it exists today, with the goal of recommending ways to improve it.

- Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging is a research and policy center at Hunter College in East Harlem. Brookdale's team conducted a field analysis of SU-CASA over two years and used the findings to help develop recommendations.

- Lifetime Arts is a nonprofit service organization that helps develop arts programs for older adults, trains providers across the country in the principles of creative aging, and helps build organizations' capacity to run the programs on their own. For this initiative, Lifetime Arts provided training and professional development to the senior centers, arts organizations, and teaching artists involved in SU-CASA programs.
- LiveOn NY, which advocates for policies to improve the lives of older adults in New York City, has been convening stakeholders, including DFTA and DCLA, and building a coalition to advocate for SU-CASA and other creative aging programs.

After a brief overview of creative aging and its current status in NYC, the following chapters outline the research methods used in the Creative Aging Initiative, present the main findings from this research effort, and conclude with a set of policy recommendations for SU-CASA and the creative aging field in New York City.

I like that it is hard. I get nervous, but I love it.

—SU-CASA participant

WHAT IS CREATIVE AGING?

Creative aging refers to programs promoting arts participation by older adults. Creative aging as exemplified by SU-CASA is based on five principles:

- Instructors are professional teaching artists.
- Instruction is sequential; each lesson builds on the one before.
- Classes build toward a culminating event (a performance or exhibition).
- Teaching artists encourage creativity and experimentation.
- The class promotes social engagement.

The field of creative aging grew out of the Creativity and Aging Study by Gene Cohen and colleagues (2006), funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. The study was based on the theory that arts participation stimulates social engagement and contributes to older adults' sense of control or mastery, which in turn promotes well-being. The arts can also showcase older adults in a new light: one of the programs in that study, Elders Share the Arts, was founded by Susan Perlstein in 1979 as an effort to combat ageist stereotypes and show older people as bearers of history and culture (Jeffri & Hanna, 2016).

The focus on positive aging in healthy adults differentiates creative aging from the practice of art therapy or hospital-based art programs, which focus on healing.



Photo by Jeremy Amar

WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF CREATIVE AGING IN NYC?

Over the past decade, creative aging has begun to thrive in New York City, especially through SU-CASA and programs in the public libraries. The research outlined in this paper takes the pulse of this effort and suggests ways to build on its success.

SU-CASA

The SU-CASA program began as a small demonstration project known as SPARC (Seniors Partnering with Artists Citywide) in 2010. SPARC was developed as part of Age-Friendly NYC, which built on the city's participation in the World Health Organization's Global Age-friendly Cities Initiative. New York City Council members adopted the program, seeking to bring working artists into senior centers in their districts. In 2016, the program was expanded and renamed SU-CASA, and it is now funded by the City Council on a year-to-year basis.

SU-CASA provides programming in senior centers across the five boroughs through two branches of funding:

1. The City Council designates funds for cultural organizations, which are vetted for appropriate credentials by DCLA, DFTA, and community partners. Each City Council member then selects

three vetted organizations to run programs in designated senior centers in the member's district.

2. The City Council designates funds to the five borough arts councils, which then distribute grants on a competitive basis to independent teaching artists to run programs in designated senior centers.

In both cases, the host senior centers also receive a portion of the grant.

In SU-CASA's first year (2016), the City Council supported 102 residencies, two in each district of the city. By 2019, the SU-CASA program supported a total of 244 teaching artist residencies (independent artists and organizations) at 224 neighborhood senior centers across the 51 City Council districts.

OTHER ARTS OPPORTUNITIES

SU-CASA presents a tremendous opportunity for older New Yorkers to participate in the arts, but it's not the only game in town. Creative aging programs with different program structures come from a variety of sources. They are offered not only at senior centers and other venues for older adults, but also at public libraries, museums and studios, colleges and art schools, and other sites.

The city's three library systems are a particularly robust source of participatory arts programs for older adults. Staff members at the three library systems—the New York Public Library, which covers the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island; Brooklyn Public Library; and Queens Public Library—have received training from Lifetime Arts to support programs that meet the principles of creative aging (see Case Study: Brooklyn Public Library). Programs can be found year-round at various branches, but the specific availability of offerings depends on grant funding from public and private sources.

Organizations whose chief focus is older adults offer individual arts programs by partnering with teaching artists or cultural outfits: for example, the long-running Sundays at JASA series, which of-

Knowing I have to come here, it makes me get up.

—SU-CASA participant

fers a wide variety of courses, including participatory art, for a semester fee. Some senior centers have strong year-round arts programs, such as those in the Carter Burden Network. The nonprofit Dances For A Variable Population fosters creative movement among all ages, but especially older adults. Cultural organizations may offer courses designed for older adults, as well as many programs and classes that are open to adults of all ages (though tuition and fees may limit access).

Colleges and universities are another option for arts programs. New York State law says public institutions must allow adults age 60 or older to audit one course per semester tuition-free, if space is available (though there is a registration fee). Private universities may offer discounts.

Appendix A outlines the landscape of creative aging programs in New York City with more detailed examples and discusses some of the challenges that providers face.

CASE STUDY

Brooklyn Public Library

The Brooklyn Public Library offers 8- to 10-week artist-led workshops that follow a sequential learning model and include a culminating event. Designed for adults 50 and older at all levels of experience, classes include theater and improvisation, singing and dance, painting and watercolor, ceramics, photography, nonfiction writing, and storytelling. In 2018, the library system served almost 700 older adults across 35 programs.

Each branch selects its classes based on community input, and classes are available in Spanish, Chinese, Creole, Polish, Russian, Hebrew, and Japanese. “Diversity is a fun challenge,” says Taina Evans, coordinator of Older Adult Services, of the effort to provide classes in the appropriate languages and subjects across the system. The library continually evaluates the response to its programs; participants almost unanimously rated them “excellent” when surveyed. Participants commonly reported that the classes had increased their skills and led to new friendships. Smaller proportions said it improved their creative expression or confidence in creating art.

For those who are homebound, the library works with DOROT’s University Without Walls program to offer remote access courses as one-hour, four-session series. Students receive art supplies in the mail and participate in exercises during classes by phone or videoconference, then work on their projects between sessions.

RESEARCH METHODS

In Brookdale’s two-year engagement with the NYC Creative Aging Initiative, we gathered evidence about SU-CASA and the broader creative aging ecosystem in different ways.

In 2018, Year 1 of the initiative, Brookdale staff members conducted **structured observations and interviews** in SU-CASA classes at 90 senior centers to observe the extent to which they followed the principles of creative aging programming and to assess the perspectives of the teaching artists, senior center staff, and cultural organizations on arts education for older adults in general and on the operation of SU-CASA specifically. The research team completed structured observations of 73 classes and attended 11 culminating presentations. The team conducted in-person interviews with 78 senior center staff members, 65 teaching artists, and staff members at six cultural organizations.

In Year 2, the Brookdale research team arranged **focus groups** of SU-CASA participants at six senior centers across the five boroughs (Appendix B). The research team observed five of the six classes and conducted the focus group before or after the class. Because all groups were reaching the end of the program, respondents consisted of the most persistent attendees or, in a few cases, individuals who joined later in the term. Most but not all class participants who were present on that day joined the focus groups. A total of 27 women and 8 men participated in the focus groups, including African American, Latinx, Asian, and white older adults.

I saw the guitar and I said, that’s it. I’m going to reinvent myself. —SU-CASA participant

The focus groups consisted of semi-structured interviews. The main focus group questions were, What brought them to the classes? What did they get out of the classes? And what would make SU-CASA the best it can be? Two students took notes during each group and then combined their notes. Notes were coded and the predominant themes were identified and discussed among the research team.

To gain a rounded perspective, Brookdale conducted **key informant interviews** with older adults, teaching artists, senior center staff members, representatives of cultural organizations and the borough arts councils, representatives of the agencies responsible for administering SU-CASA, providers of non-SU-CASA arts programming for older adults, and other stakeholders.

Brookdale synthesized the findings from these sources.

A **literature review** (Appendix C) broadly targeted scholarly articles and gray literature on arts programs for healthy older adults and excluded arts therapy programs. It included research on the effects of art training or creativity on the brain and on various aspects of well-being.

To develop final recommendations, the research team relied on the findings from observations across the two years of the initiative, as described above, as well as **convenings with stakeholders**: teaching artists, representatives of cultural organizations, senior center directors, borough arts council leaders, and SU-CASA participants. Brookdale, LiveOn NY, and Lifetime Arts then agreed upon a set of proposed recommendations.



Photo by Jeremy Amar

FINDINGS

The evidence discussed in this chapter brings us to four salient conclusions. First, creative aging is a natural for New York City. Art is part of the city’s identity, and it was the lure for many people who are now older New Yorkers. The city has a broad infrastructure for arts education, and the participation of older adults can strengthen cultural organizations and communities. Second, participants rave about their experiences with creative aging programs—the social connection and feelings of engagement, rejuvenation, and discovery—and some rigorous research supports a range of benefits. Third, older adults at all senior-serving organizations deserve SU-CASA at its best. The SU-CASA program brings arts to neighborhoods all across the city, but not all senior centers have the resources they need to truly support it. And finally, following from the first three points, it makes sense to build on the program’s success and upgrade the infrastructure of SU-CASA.

CREATIVE AGING IS A NATURAL FOR NYC

New York’s thriving arts scene is a cornerstone of its identity. New York City is a global hub of artistic talent, with a deep workforce to staff a wide variety of arts programs. Nearly 300,000 people were working in arts and culture in the city in 2013, and the creative sector has been growing (Forman, 2015). NYC is home to 18,000 for-profit cultural firms and more than 4,700 cultural nonprofits (Stern & Seifert, 2017).

In addition, New York’s creative sector boosts the city’s economy by attracting tourists, students, and residents—young and old—who want to partake in the city’s artistic vibrancy. Many of the 65 million people from across the nation and the world who visited New York in 2018 attended Broadway

Sharing your gifts with others is an opportunity.

Make time because it’s good.

—SU-CASA participant

shows, concerts, museums, and other forms of art and entertainment. Students come to the city to attend Juilliard, Pratt Institute, Cooper Union, Parsons School of Design, Mannes College of Music, the School of American Ballet, and other acclaimed art schools. Real

estate developers recognize the draw of the arts and incorporate cultural components into their projects. Wall Street financiers donate and serve on the boards of the city’s cultural institutions. Given this pervasiveness of art, it’s no surprise that SU-CASA is the largest public creative aging program in the nation.

Furthermore, engaging in art is an important source of cultural connection. Artists and audiences of all ages live in all city neighborhoods, and art can be a common bond not only between people of different ethnicities, but between artists of different generations.

ARTS AND AGING IN NYC

New York’s arts scene was a central draw for many of the people now aging here. Artists who moved to New York City in their youth may remain for decades. From Harlem in the 1940s to Greenwich Village and SoHo in the 1960s to the Lower East Side of the 1980s, artists have clustered where housing was affordable. Some of them became international figures in literature, music, painting, theater, or film. Others had less splashy success or accepted the necessity of a day job but kept on making art, teaching art, or immersing themselves in art. Some innovative initiatives have recognized the contributions of older artists: ART CART, an intergenerational arts legacy project from the Actors Fund’s Research Center for Arts & Culture, paired graduate students with aging artists to preserve and document their work, and the Performing Arts Legacy Project works along similar lines. The Carter Burden Network, which is dedicated to the well-being of older adults, designed the Carter Burden Gallery in Chelsea “to give a voice to New York City’s re-emerging older professional artists and to foster a supportive and culturally diverse artist community.”

We come together, to be accepted, and it is very important. They like my song, I feel good, I feel accepted. —SU-CASA participant

Older adults and organizations help each other.

Engagement with the arts brings older adults into contact with an essential part of the experience of living in New York City. Cultural organizations offer theater programs for older adults, senior chorales, and tailored writing groups. These organizations benefit from older adults’ participation and the necessary funding it brings, and from the inspiration of a new audience. Cultural providers also can benefit when their programs foster stronger relationships with other community organizations (Stern & Seifert, 2017).

Likewise, organizations that serve older adults—the Department for the Aging (DFTA), nonprofit organizations, and senior centers—are recognizing the importance of integrating art into their programs as a way to promote engagement and health. Since 2011, New York City has invested in 16 Innovative Senior Centers, which are charged with offering a wide array of services, including arts and cultural programs. Other examples include the Carter Burden Network’s year-round program called Making Art Work, and DOROT’s art classes, community chorus, and intergenerational workshops.

BUILDING ON WHAT IS ALREADY IN PLACE

Strengthening the arts strengthens communities, according to the Social Impact of the Arts Project, a three-year study of cultural ecology and social well-being in New York City. “Culture makes a difference in neighborhood communities by stimulating social interaction, amplifying community voice, animating the public environment, and shaping public culture,” the authors report (Stern & Seifert, 2017, p. V-2). By promoting civic engagement, cultural resources may have spillover effects that contribute to well-being (Stern & Seifert, 2017).

New York City already has a broad infrastructure for arts education. Its three library systems have more than 200 branches across the city, and there are more than 250 senior centers. Given the geographical reach it enjoys, SU-CASA provides a built-in opportunity for an investment in neighborhood cultural resources.

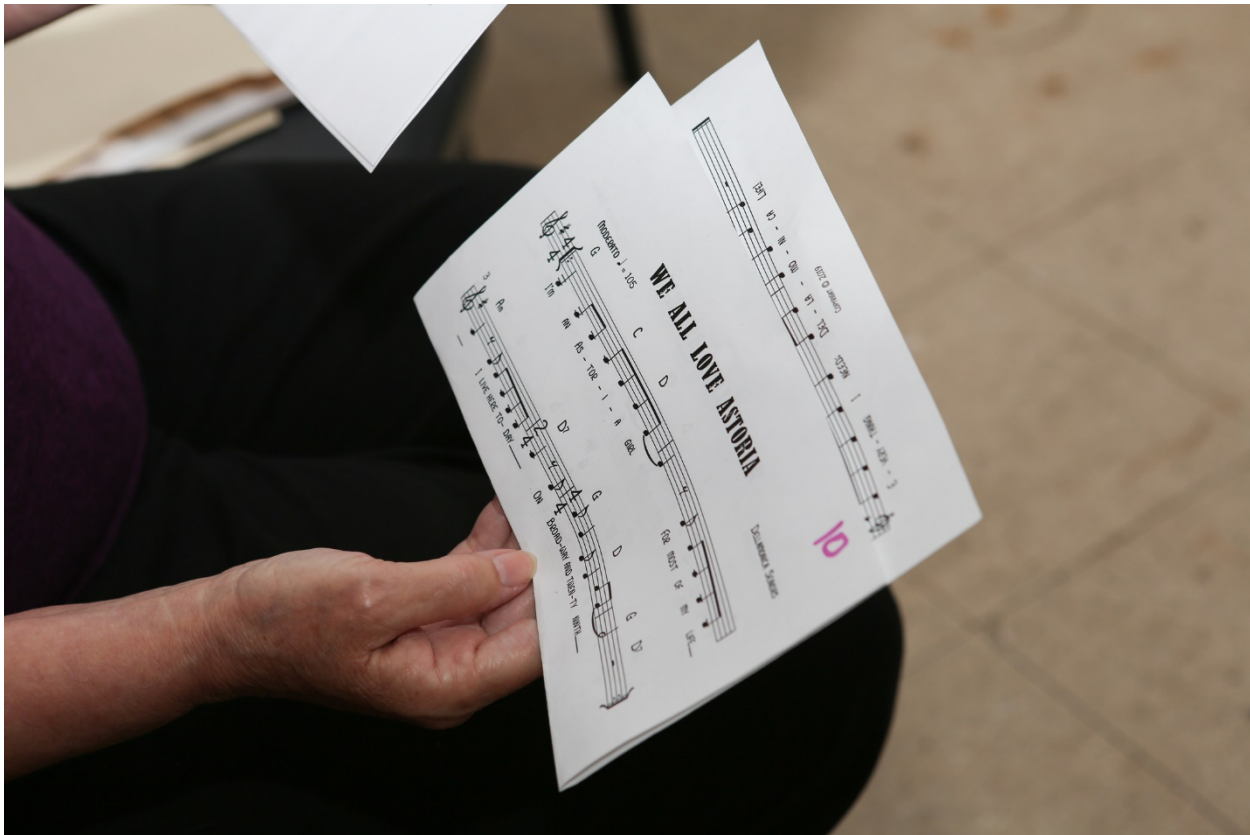


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PARTICIPANTS RAVE ABOUT CREATIVE AGING PROGRAMS AND THEIR BENEFITS

The people who participate in creative aging programs report numerous benefits beyond those of senior center attendance alone. Participants in SU-CASA programs value the social connection and report feeling rejuvenated, reclaiming long-buried musical dreams, or reinventing themselves. (Case Study: Our Time Together presents an example of a SU-CASA program.) The qualitative literature is rich with similar reports. Evidence from random assignment studies, while limited, has shown some benefits for social interaction, cognitive function, and physical and mental health.

FINDINGS FROM THE SU-CASA ANALYSIS

In June 2019, Brookdale’s research team visited SU-CASA programs at senior centers in each of the five boroughs in order to hear from a diverse cross section of participants. The focus groups included participants from one flamenco dance class, two theater classes, two singing classes, and one class in graffiti art. Three programs were conducted by independent teaching artists, and three by teaching artists from cultural organizations. Responses were overwhelmingly positive. (See Appendix B for the full focus group report.) The predominant themes below illustrate the benefits of the programs.

CASE STUDY

Our Time Together

At Hugh Gilroy Neighborhood Senior Center in Weeksville, Brooklyn, participants in the SU-CASA weaving class, called Our Time Together, took to it so well that the teaching artist, Jamie Boyle, had to hustle to keep up. Boyle credits the center director at the time, Leishanna Lawrence, for knowing her community well and requesting a program they would like—even if, at first, some were skeptical of their ability to weave. Lawrence also promoted it well, with a lot of announcements.

Boyle was surprised to have 11 people in her first class. The class grew as they recruited more friends, she said—“once it was deemed fun in the room.” She had planned a course of sequential learning, faithful to the principles that guide SU-CASA, but the enthusiastic participants took over and treated it as more of a creative activity than a class. “I view that as a failure and a success,” she said. The class strayed from her structure, but the students grabbed up the new ideas she presented and experimented on their own.

Boyle encouraged participants to see their work as art by bringing a frame to class and putting the finished pieces in the frame: “It felt strong,” she said. She tried to cultivate a feeling of what an artist’s studio is like. The participants inspired each other, and they displayed their work—an impressive 61 weavings—at an exhibition held at the same time as their regular class. Rather than bask in their glory, the artists wanted to spend that time weaving more. But after someone took the first photo of a weaver with her art, Boyle said, “pride swelled.”

Social interaction was important. Participants in SU-CASA focus groups spoke of wanting to avoid isolation at home after retirement; one woman said, “Las paredes embrutecen” (*The walls dull your senses*). They appreciated the new friendships they made at the senior centers, and especially the camaraderie of classes where they shared their creativity. One man said he liked that the class required interaction with the other group members, as opposed to tai chi or computer classes, which he could do alone. The art projects created a community—in one program, participants wrote a song together about their lives—and the friendships they made in the classes extended beyond the senior center. One woman picked up her friend at 8 a.m. on class days to be sure they’d be in class by 9:30. Members of another group went to jazz clubs together.

Classes helped participants reject stereotypes of old age. A flamenco student said that she came to the center “to have a better life, because our life has not finished—a new dimension has started.” Another woman urged friends to persist: “Keep going, you can do it. I feel like a 15-year-old, I’m 72.” This was echoed by a classmate who reported that her daughter had said, “Mom, you’re acting like a teenager. What’s going on?”

Reinvention was a common theme. Participants in SU-CASA focus groups spoke of renewal and reinvention, sometimes after periods of sickness or struggle. One woman told of her love of the guitar when she was young, but said her husband made her give it up so she wouldn’t attract attention from

other men. “My guitar was buried in the graveyard,” she declared. After visiting a senior center for guitar lessons and then becoming an instructor herself, she said passionately, “My guitar is out of the grave. The center gave me my life back.” Whether honing their skills or developing unexpected new ones, they were proud of their efforts and accomplishments.

Participants noticed physical, cognitive, and emotional improvements. They said the classes were fun—both stimulating and relaxing. Dancers felt they were moving more easily, and a woman in a theater group said the class built her confidence. Participants also felt that the mental challenge of learning lines, music, or steps—as well as the social engagement in general—helped keep their minds sharp. Some participants were keen to increase their mastery of the art form and appreciated what they learned from the teacher as well as from their classmates.

FINDINGS FROM THE LITERATURE REVIEW

There is some research to support participants’ perceptions. Other researchers who have asked older adults how arts programs affected their well-being received similar responses. The situation is more complex when examining hypotheses about specific benefits for health, physical activity, memory, depression, and other outcomes. Results are less consistent, and the studies are not equally strong in their ability to determine whether any difference observed was truly due to the specific program studied. (See Appendix C for the full literature review.)

I know that if I do music it will help—I will live longer. —SU-CASA participant

The findings presented here begin with the strongest studies, which use a random assignment design. Randomization ensures that different outcomes between program and control groups are not caused by self-selection into the program—for example, people likely to enroll may be in better health, be more active socially, or be different in some way that’s not easily measured. The rigorous studies discussed below have focused on theater, dance, and singing programs, and a brain imaging study examined music students, visual arts students, and a comparison group. These studies tend to focus on either the effects of learning (especially with cognitive outcomes, such as memory and attention) or social participation; none of the programs studied by random assignment emphasized creativity.

RANDOM ASSIGNMENT STUDIES

Theater training led to cognitive improvements. Helga Noice and Tony Noice have published three large studies of their four-week theatrical program, designed to enhance cognitive functioning in older adults through the core process of acting. As an actor, the participant is expected to experience a role through the thoughts, emotions, and physical expressions and movement it generates. The researchers have compared participants in their program not only with control groups but also with a visual arts appreciation group (Noice, Noice, & Staines, 2004) and a singing group (Noice & Noice, 2009), which helps to clarify the effects of participation in acting exercises rather than simply participation in a group cultural activity. At the end of the program, theater participants had higher scores than a control group on word recall and problem solving (Noice et al., 2004); personal growth,



Photo by Jeremy Amar

problem solving, verbal fluency, and three out of four memory tests (Noice & Noice, 2009); and a test of managing finances and medications (Noice & Noice, 2013). The visual arts appreciation group and the singing group showed some but not all of these gains.

Choir participation reduced loneliness and increased interest in life. Researchers tested the effects of the 44-week Community of Voices choir program on health, well-being, and health care costs. Six senior centers in the San Francisco area were randomly assigned to the choir program, while six others were placed on a waiting list for the program; 390 older adults participated in the study. After six months, choir members experienced greater improvements in loneliness and interest in life than the control group did. The program did not, however, result in significant differences in tests of memory and executive function, or in lower body strength, balance, or gait speed (Johnson et al., 2020).

Taking part in a choir improved mental but not physical health. A large study examined whether a community singing program in England led to better mental and physical health. The study involved 265 adults age 60 and older, about half of whom were randomly assigned to one of five 12-week singing groups led by experienced musicians. At the end of the program, choir members reported better mental health and reduced levels of depression and anxiety compared with the control group, although the effects had faded somewhat three months after the program ended. There was no significant difference in physical health or health care use (Coulton, Clift, Skingley, & Rodriguez, 2015).

A dance program showed cognitive and physical effects. A small random assignment study of neural plasticity involving 35 older adults examined the effects of a six-month weekly dance course

on a range of outcomes, including cognition, intelligence, attention, reaction time, motor skills, tactile performance, posture, self-reported well-being, and cardio-respiratory performance. The dance class did not emphasize creativity but did involve learning steps of increasing complexity. Adults in the dance course had improved cognitive performance in the areas of memory, attention, nonverbal learning, and reaction times, as well as hand-motor skills, tactile performance, and posture, while control group members did not improve. The dancers also reported changes in well-being, with three-quarters saying they felt better. Surprisingly, cardiorespiratory performance did not improve (Kattenstroth, Kalisch, Holt, Tegenthoff, & Dinse, 2013).

Music and art training resulted in changes in neural activity. In a longitudinal study of 53 older adults in the Greater Toronto area, Alain et al. (2019) examined the effects of short-term music and visual art training on brain function, as measured by a neuropsychological assessment and neuro-electric brain activity. Participants were assigned in a pseudorandom manner to groups receiving three months of classroom training in either music or visual arts. To account for potential training effects, the researchers recruited a comparison group that received no instruction. In the psychometric assessments, which included tests of verbal comprehension, verbal memory, and cognitive processing speed, neither the music nor the visual arts program showed an impact. In the electroencephalographic (EEG) testing, however, the researchers observed brain changes in the area of inhibitory control and auditory and visual processing in both training groups, but not the comparison group. Enhanced responses to piano tones in both training groups had persisted at a three-month follow-up, though visual processing effects faded. In addition, the visual art training and the music training had different and specific effects on auditory and visual systems. The authors acknowledge that the changes were modest, but they interpret the findings as “clear causal evidence that the aged brain is more plastic than traditionally thought” (Alain et al., 2019, p. 13).

I come, I walk slowly, but I come.

—SU-CASA participant

OTHER QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

Other studies have measured the differences between participants’ assessments before and after a program and compared them with similar groups of people who did not participate, but without using random assignment. These findings can suggest likely outcomes of the program, but they are susceptible to bias, because there may be unmeasured differences between the groups.

Chorale members reported better health outcomes. In one large study, participants in a chorale, one year after the program began, rated their overall health higher than the comparison group did. They also reported fewer doctor visits, less over-the-counter medication use, fewer falls, and fewer other health problems (Cohen et al., 2006).

Music programs may have boosted activity and spiritual growth. In a study involving 98 older adults in the UK, participants in music programs had significantly greater increases in physical activity and spiritual growth than a comparison group in a learning program unrelated to the arts. There was no significant difference between the groups’ improvements in well-being, health-promoting behaviors, or interpersonal relations (Perkins & Williamson, 2014).



Photo by Julia Xanthos Liddy

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Qualitative research on creative aging programs is consistent with the findings from the SU-CASA focus groups. Focus groups and interviews are important in exploring how programs may achieve their effects, but without corresponding conversations with people who did not participate, or who dropped out of the program, it cannot show that the program *caused* effects that would not have occurred in the absence of the program.

Participants in community arts programs felt they benefited from the concentration involved and the shared commitment. Arts, Health and Seniors (AHS), a community-engaged arts program in Vancouver, aimed to foster social inclusion through weekly sessions in puppetry, dancing, writing, digital storytelling, and visual and textile arts. Two studies found improvements in perceived overall health and experience of pain; in particular, concentrating on a project helped people forget about chronic pain temporarily (Phinney, Moody, & Small, 2014). Participants said that the structure and discipline of the program, along with the mutual commitment toward their shared project, helped them overcome emotional or physical barriers to getting out of the house (Phinney et al., 2014). Because the program involved group collaboration toward shared goals, “the participants became a more cohesive group” (Moody & Phinney, 2012, p. 62).

Creativity and social interaction contributed to happiness. In a study of psychosocial and mental well-being, researchers surveyed 138 students before and after a 12-week professionally taught course in visual arts in San Antonio. Participants said that both the social interaction of the classes and their ability to be creative made them feel better. The cognitive challenge of the work, they said, increased their ability to focus, and the process made them feel calm, relaxed, and happy. One woman wrote, “Making art is like taking a vitamin for your entire body. It is very good” (Cantu & Fleuriot, 2018, p. 126).

SUMMARY OF THE EVIDENCE

- Creative aging programs create an opportunity for social engagement, a benefit that participants appreciate.
- Learning leads to neurological changes, and some strong studies have shown improvements in cognitive function, but other rigorous research has not.
- Different art forms can have specific effects on neural plasticity.
- There is strong evidence that certain theater and choral programs can improve psychological health. Other arts programs have not been rigorously tested, but many participants report greater happiness and fulfillment.
- Music and dance programs have been shown to improve posture and reaction times. Some evidence suggests that arts programs can contribute to increased stamina, fewer falls, and pain relief, but research is not conclusive.

My guitar was buried in the graveyard. [Now] my guitar is out of the grave. I am alive, the center gave me my life back. —SU-CASA participant

OLDER ADULTS AT ALL SENIOR-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS DESERVE SU-CASA AT ITS BEST

SU-CASA is a phenomenal public investment. By funding five programs in each of NYC’s 51 City Council districts, SU-CASA makes arts opportunities available in neighborhoods all across the city. The city’s nearly 250 senior centers—the largest system in the country—provides an infrastructure across the five boroughs that can accommodate arts programming. Yet there are serious inequities in the resources and capacities these centers have available to run arts programming. And matching programs to centers, in such a diverse city, can present another challenge.

SENIOR CENTER RESOURCES VARY

Visits to senior centers with SU-CASA programs demonstrated that some have greater capacity, in terms of staff and/or facilities, than others. Some centers have dedicated art studios of various kinds; others have only one or two rooms to host all their activities. For example, the singing class at one center was held in a dedicated music room, while the singing class at another center was in a cramped



Photo by Jeremy Amar

area at one end of the main lunch and activity room, next to the restrooms and maintenance closets, because that's where the piano was. Center members were still appreciative of the program. At another center, one participant said, "Everything is in that room—dominoes, exercise—but we manage."

Some centers have rich arts and learning programs in addition to the SU-CASA class or classes, while others have only the SU-CASA program for a few months of the year. One man said he had joined his center for the swimming, but he admitted with a smile, "I find it hard getting to the pool with all the singing classes." It stands to reason that the senior center staff and volunteers have more built-in resources and experience in running effective arts programming in centers where they do a lot of it.

[I come to class] to have a better life, because our life has not finished, a new dimension has started.

—SU-CASA participant

At the same time, centers with a lot of arts programming have cultivated an audience for that programming—older adults learn to embrace the opportunity. One participant said "I was like a wild woman" because there were so many classes to choose from at her center. Older adults at centers with occasional and sporadic programming attend the center for other reasons, with arts programming appearing as an unexpected bonus. Others shop around, looking for their favorite activities at more than one center.

Centers with a lot of arts experience

- are aware of the annual SU-CASA process and how to request specific programs for their center,
- have had more opportunity to learn what programs their members are interested in,
- know how to market culminating events, and
- are able to market their programs effectively to repeat customers and those who have attended culminating events.

Centers with fewer resources do not have these capacities.

The geographic dispersal of SU-CASA is a great benefit, but success begets success. Those centers without the needed capacity may be located in areas with the lowest amount of resources, reflecting the NYC arts world more broadly. The Social Impact of the Arts Project found that, while every neighborhood has a cultural scene (see Case Study: Seniors in Motion), arts resources are far greater in Manhattan below 125th Street and neighborhoods near downtown Brooklyn than in the rest of the city: “The dominant pattern is one of privilege generating more privilege” (Stern & Seifert, 2017, p. VI-6). The researchers suggest that cultural resources may carry more bang for the buck in terms of social well-being in lower-income neighborhoods, where they promote social connection and therefore social capital, than in higher-income neighborhoods where residents have greater economic resources (Stern & Seifert, 2017).

CASE STUDY

Seniors in Motion

Some arts programs spring from unexpected sources. Detective Josie Ruiz, of the New York Police Department’s Community Affairs Bureau, was on the lookout for ways to reach older adults across the city, in addition to her twice-yearly luncheon called Aged to Perfection. She knew Pregones / Puerto Rican Traveling Theater from her childhood, and she stopped in one day to ask them what they do for seniors.

Pregones, which ran four SU-CASA programs in the Bronx in 2019, worked with her to start Seniors in Motion at the Frederick Samuel Community Center in Harlem. Each spring, a group of 4 to 10 participants create their own musical and build toward a performance, along the same lines as SU-CASA.

Detective Ruiz advertises with Spanish and English fliers in senior centers in Police Service Area 6, between 116th and 145th Streets. In the neighborhood, Community Affairs officers, who work to strengthen community relationships and trust, pick up participants and bring them to the program. If transportation were not an issue, she said, she would love to draw people from across the city.

MATCHING CAN BE A CHALLENGE

In the SU-CASA program, the City Council, DFTA, and the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) do a remarkable job of matching the right artists and programs to NYC's very diverse senior centers—*most* of the time.

In the first year of Brookdale's field analysis (2018), teaching artists and senior centers were matched well in the vast majority of classes observed, and there appeared to be a high level of engagement from participants. For example, Midwood Neighborhood Senior Center in Brooklyn offered a SU-CASA class in Carnival costume design that married the capacity of the senior center and the expertise of the teaching artist with the interests of the participants. Senior center members who hailed from Caribbean locations such as Guyana, Trinidad, and Grenada designed costumes for the upcoming Carnival Costume Design Expo & Parade in New York City. Participants appeared comfortable and enthusiastic. Students were observed laughing, dancing, and singing throughout the class—as well as working hard on their costumes. One student planned to bring materials home so she could design and create Carnival costumes with her children and grandchildren.

With all the singing, dancing and all the camaraderie, it makes me happy.

—SU-CASA participant

Every year, however, there are linguistic, project, and infrastructure mismatches. In some cases, senior center members were not interested in the art form, or teaching artists and students did not share a common language. There were also matches made with centers that lacked appropriate resources for the program, including a digital photography program matched with a center that had no computers and a pottery class held in a center with no firing kiln.

SU-CASA IS READY FOR AN INFRASTRUCTURE UPGRADE

Brookdale's research shows that SU-CASA has been largely a success—and New York City has the opportunity to strengthen its leadership in the field of creative aging by building on that success. Interviews and focus groups with program administrators, senior center directors, teaching artists, and participants have raised some specific opportunities for improvement, involving the selection process, training and other support, and marketing the program. At present, SU-CASA is operated by a team of agencies and organizations, without a dedicated coordinator, making it difficult to address these issues. A stronger infrastructure would make it possible to improve the program's administration, standardize training, build organizations' program capacity, market SU-CASA, and link it to New York City's broader cultural life.

CLARITY

Many called for more clarity in the selection process, especially where senior centers are concerned. Senior center directors have said they don't know how to apply for a program. And when they have been selected for one, they may not find out until the arts council or cultural organization contacts

them. On a broader level, program implementers and participants do not understand how all the parts of SU-CASA fit together. Staff members at senior centers that were hosting SU-CASA programs did not always know that they had one, and they certainly did not know whom to contact when they had questions about it.

CONTINUITY

There is no established process to allow an artist to continue or return to a center where the program has been a great success; it depends on the designations in the next year's cycle. In the interest of providing variety, some selection panels discourage placing an artist at the same center two years in a row, even if it appears to be an ideal match. This was the case with a SU-CASA program at a nursing home, where a clown had run a much-loved program and the residents wanted him to return.



Photo by Julia Xanthos Liddy

TIMELINE

The program timeline was a challenge for senior center directors, cultural organizations and teaching artists, and participants. The City Council designates SU-CASA funds in each fiscal year's budget (June 30). In the fall, City Council members recommend cultural organizations and senior centers from their districts to a panel of representatives from DCLA, DFTA, and community partners. The panel reviews the proposals that were submitted by the cultural organizations and sends approvals back to the City Council members. At the same time, City Council members send their senior center choices to the borough arts councils, which have solicited proposals from independent teaching artists. The arts councils survey the senior centers on their interests and convene panels that choose the winning proposals and suggest pairings of artists with centers. The arts councils then send their recommendations to the City Council members, who make the final decisions. In the case of both cultural organizations and individual artists, typically it is January before the pairings are approved, and it may be February or even later before the contracts are complete. Meanwhile, senior centers often make their schedules far ahead of time and then must fit in SU-CASA when and where they can.

Residencies are supposed to take place between January 1 and June 30 each year, but delays in announcement of the program selections mean that programs must be condensed into a shorter period. Teaching artists typically visit the center before starting the program to understand its culture and preferences, and with the administrative complexity, they frequently have less time to get to know the center and ensure that the program will work well for the participants.

TRAINING

While many teaching artists and some senior center staff members have attended training sessions on creative aging, there is not a consistent level of knowledge, especially among senior center staff. Staff members who received clear information about SU-CASA and understood it were better able to promote the program and help it run smoothly. Without a wider understanding of SU-CASA's sequential instruction approach, teaching artists and organizations said, it can be difficult to live up to the creative aging ideal. For example, they have noted that attendance is not consistent, a theme reflected in the SU-CASA class observations. But center directors have pointed out that some senior center members prefer classes on a drop-in basis.

I feel beautiful here, because I am the artist.

—SU-CASA participant

Training is available for those who can take time for it. Over the two years of the NYC Creative Aging Initiative, Lifetime Arts offered around 30 training sessions, webinars, and networking salons to hundreds of teaching artists and senior center and arts organization staff members across the five boroughs. These trainings were all grant-funded, including payment for teaching artists to attend. The training covered the research on creative aging; universal design, diverse learners, and how teaching artists design programs that take individual learners' needs and goals into account; the difference between passive, "drop-in" arts programming and sequential skill building; and the positive



Photo by Julia Xanthos Liddy

impact that sequential, skill-building programs have on senior center members and the community at large.

The training sessions were well received by those who attended, but senior center staff members, in particular, found it difficult to attend, as it involved taking a day away from their centers. And while teaching artists received grant funding (from a separate grant) for their participation, senior center staff members did not.

SUPPORT FOR SENIOR CENTERS

Administrative support could make the process more efficient and relieve the burden on senior centers and arts partners. For example, the borough arts councils report difficulties in getting information to and from the senior centers that have been granted SU-CASA programs. Each arts council must establish a process to reach out to the senior centers to learn their preferences in order to make good matches. This outreach is important in marketing both the program to participants and the culminating event to the wider community. Yet center directors are often overwhelmed with other responsibilities and may not respond promptly to requests for information. When needed, arts council outreach also involves explaining the procedures and goals of the program to the centers, sometimes every year, because of staff turnover.

SUPPORT FOR TEACHING ARTISTS

Most teaching artists observed and interviewed were enthusiastic, energetic, and talented; however, some reported resentments stemming from the hardships of working in a program where they struggle with the level of pay, delays in getting paid, and the need to cover supplies out of their own pocket. For example, one teacher complained that she did not get paid until late fall for the program she conducted in the spring, and she said that other teachers had declined to participate for this reason.

FEEDBACK

After the effort they expended over the course of the program, teachers and administrators wanted more information from centers and participants to know specifically what was working and what was not. DCLA surveys the senior centers about their SU-CASA experience and releases aggregate results, but the borough arts councils wanted more information about the responses from specific centers to help in the next year's selection process. Some councils survey the centers themselves, which makes duplicate work for centers that respond. Some teaching artists also asked for more feedback.

MARKETING

Marketing of the individual programs and culminating events was inconsistent. Some culminating events were widely attended and were a source of pride to participants. Others struggled for an audience. One teaching artist reported a “huge” turnout at a final event, which turned out to be something of a revelation to the senior center members. Many in the audience said they would have joined the class if they had known about it. At another center, a SU-CASA participant said several people “wanted to start coming after they saw what we did.”

I say I can't do it and the next thing I know I'm doing it. —SU-CASA participant

SU-CASA participants in focus groups were enthusiastic about their programs and thankful for them. But they were surprised to learn the breadth of the program. They did not realize that their programs were part of a citywide initiative and did not recognize the SU-CASA name—nor did many staff members at the centers. Participants were eager to know what was available at other centers, but there is no public listing of SU-CASA programs. The nation's largest program of its kind is, in a way, invisible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence presented in the preceding chapter, the NYC Creative Aging Initiative developed recommendations for building on the success of SU-CASA. These points center on strengthening the program's infrastructure, improving equity among the programs, and better integrating creative aging programs into the city arts ecosystem.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Recommendations addressing SU-CASA's infrastructure fall into the categories of administration, the selection and matching process, and programming structure and support.

ADMINISTRATION

- SU-CASA needs a single entity charged with providing administrative support to the City Council, the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA), and the Department for the Aging (DFTA), as well as the borough arts councils, cultural organizations, and senior centers implementing SU-CASA. No single office currently serves this purpose for the program as a whole, leaving several administrative functions unfulfilled. The office would have the following responsibilities:
 - Coordinate both arms of the program: the grants to cultural organizations and the grants to borough arts councils to select independent teaching artists.
 - Determine training needs for senior center staff, teaching artists, and administrators.
 - Define required capacity for senior-serving organizations and disseminate that information.
 - Standardize and publicize procedures for teaching artists and cultural organizations (timeline, application process, payment, reporting requirements).
 - Provide guidance on budgeting and program costs.
 - Ensure that all eligible senior centers and other senior-serving organizations understand the value and requirements of SU-CASA and the process for inclusion.
 - Serve as the marketing hub.
- Encourage participation in a yearly self-evaluation component; DCLA can share individual site evaluations with arts councils and cultural organizations.

I'm alive because I'm doing what I want to do.

—SU-CASA participant

SELECTION AND MATCHING PROCESS

- Personnel from the City Council, DFTA, and DCLA should meet twice a year (before and after adoption of the city budget) to determine ways to expedite the selection process.
- Pay special attention to the matching process:
 - Consult with senior center program directors and evaluate centers based on language, culture, choice of art form, facility, and schedule. Ensure that older adults have a voice.
 - Seek teaching artists who speak languages besides English, as well as older artists, in both the recruitment and decision processes.
 - Expect teaching artists and cultural organizations to have a planning meeting at the designated senior center and hold a demonstration class for center members.
 - Establish a process for reassignment of teaching artists or cultural organizations after the planning meeting if the pairing is not feasible.
- Allow senior centers and teaching artists more time to prepare, promote, and run the programs. A longer start-up period would help teaching artists integrate the program into the center.



Photo by Jeremy Amar

PROGRAMMING STRUCTURE AND SUPPORT

- Clearly define program structure options that go beyond current proposal and contract specifications. For example, splitting a residency into two distinct, shorter workshop series might make it easier for participants to attend consistently and could expand SU-CASA's impact by attracting different students.
- Establish a structure to support senior-serving organizations in learning about the program options and selecting the right one for the situation.
- Provide ongoing support to artists and cultural organizations as they design and conduct the programs to promote best practices and establish a point of contact in case of questions or problems.

I don't want the program to end because there's so much more to learn. —SU-CASA participant

EQUITY

The infrastructure recommendations above are fundamental in addressing inequity. These steps would alleviate identified challenges for all involved with SU-CASA, but they are particularly important for senior centers and cultural organizations that are smaller, that have fewer resources, or that are newer to SU-CASA and creative aging. These steps are also particularly important for teaching artists who have less stable income and those for whom English is not their first language.

In addition to the recommendations above:

- Ensure that senior centers and other senior-serving organizations that have not applied for SU-CASA before, or that have not been granted a program, receive information and technical assistance at application time so they can take advantage of the opportunity.
- Develop and provide technical assistance to organizations that lack the necessary capacity (such as through partnering with a more experienced organization, tighter connection with an arts council or cultural organization, or referral to a supporting organization).
- Provide additional funding for supplies to allocate to organizations that lack the resources to implement a proposal (for example, centers without a computer or a piano keyboard).
- Allow exceptions to the requirement that SU-CASA programs be conducted on the senior center premises when the center has space or resource constraints (for example, permitting a singing class to be held at a nearby church if the center lacks a piano). This would allow centers to forge beneficial partnerships with other organizations.

BRINGING SU-CASA AND CREATIVE AGING INTO THE CITY ARTS ECOSYSTEM

Strengthening creative aging in NYC involves raising the profile of SU-CASA and opening the door to wider engagement with potential partners.

- Market and raise the profile of SU-CASA.
 - Issue a joint DFTA-DCLA press release promoting the information about the art mediums and classes being offered as soon as possible once decided, with a full list of when and where classes will take place. Promote this list on social media to encourage participation. Encourage all City Council members to share the information on their social media and in their newsletters.
 - Institute a searchable system to allow seniors to look for arts classes at centers in their neighborhood on an ongoing basis. (The NYC Parks online [events calendar](#) is an example.)
 - Invite stakeholders to classes and culminating events: participants' family and friends, as well as City Council members, other elected officials, community partners, local businesses, and potential funders.
 - Have open house events at senior centers to increase visibility in their neighborhoods.
 - Set aside a small pool of funds for groups to compete for SU-CASA special awards, including the opportunity to perform or exhibit at other locations (or conferences, etc.). When programs are successful, participants would like to show their work beyond their senior center.
- Encourage senior center directors to align SU-CASA programs with their overall programming, such as by incorporating a field trip that is relevant to the program but open to all center members.
- Promote the importance of creative aging in NYC and beyond through an emphasis on partnerships, research, and continued integration with age-friendly practice and policy.
 - Build on the success of the Culture Pass program (allowing individuals with a library card free access to participating arts institutions) by allowing those with a DFTA senior center card to enjoy the same privileges.
 - Build the capacity of the senior services network (not just senior centers) to offer creative aging programs.
 - Recruit more cultural organizations to be champions of creative aging.
 - Recruit academic partners to conduct research/evaluation in collaboration with senior-serving organizations, arts organizations, and older adults.
- Promote intergenerational opportunities, including storytelling projects or video collaborations with students.

CONCLUSION

As a city with art in its veins, New York is a natural leader in creative aging. The city's SU-CASA program—the largest of its kind in the nation—offers exuberant evidence of this: participants love it and attest to the difference it makes in their lives. But SU-CASA needs a stronger infrastructure to expand and thrive. As creative aging matures as a field of practice, its progress depends on increased visibility and the collaborative efforts of cultural organizations, senior-serving organizations, city agencies, and the arts community at large. Like New York City itself, art draws its vitality from a diverse pool of resources.

THE CREATIVE AGING LANDSCAPE OF NEW YORK CITY

New York's SU-CASA program is the hub of creative aging in the city. The program brings a wide variety of free arts courses to senior centers in every City Council district every spring. SU-CASA's success is attributable to city agencies and council members, New York City's extensive system of senior centers, and the multitude of arts organizations and teaching artists who call the city home. And many of the same cultural organizations that participate in SU-CASA—from Pregones / Puerto Rican Traveling Theater in the Bronx to Snug Harbor Cultural Center in Staten Island—provide similar programs at senior centers and other venues through other sources of funding.

If you know where to look, New York City has an array of arts programs for older adults. These programs have much in common but sprang from different sources with different objectives: organizations seeking to enhance services for their older adult clientele; organizations seeking to better serve a broader population; groups focused on a specific issue of well-being, such as social isolation or dementia; cultural organizations aspiring to increase arts appreciation and draw a new audience; and public colleges striving to strengthen civic involvement. Programs often arise from multiple objectives, by means of mutually beneficial partnerships.

For all creative aging programs, the basic building blocks are the same: artists, older adults, funding, and an organization to serve as the glue.

- Teaching artists may be employees of a cultural organization, independent artists, or even experienced volunteers.
- Older adults connect with arts programs through neighborhood senior centers, other senior-serving organizations, and libraries; they may also seek out programs at cultural organizations or schools.
- Funding sources, typically a mix of public and private, may vary according to the specific objectives of the program. For example, city funds might predominate in supporting smaller organizations that are focused on a City Council initiative, while a health care corporation might fund a program tailored toward a specific health outcome.
- Partnerships may be driven by senior-serving organizations seeking teaching artists, cultural organizations seeking a connection to older adults, or community organizations hoping to expand intergenerational programs and offer something new.

New York City's programs are large and small, with different emphases and program structures, and they are at many stages of development. While a comprehensive listing is not possible, this appendix gives examples of different kinds of arts programs—some free to participants and others not—that focus on or welcome older adults. In the list that follows, sponsoring organizations are loosely di-

vided into five domains: senior services, community services, health and well-being, arts and education, and creative aging itself. The appendix concludes with a discussion of the challenges all kinds of organizations face in funding and marketing the programs and fostering participation.

SENIOR SERVICES

SU-CASA

The SU-CASA program is the largest public participatory arts program for older adults in the United States. As discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 1, the New York City Council funds SU-CASA, which is administered with the city's Department for the Aging (DFTA) and Department of Cultural Affairs.

In 2019, the SU-CASA program supported a total of 244 teaching artist residencies (independent artists and organizations) at neighborhood senior-serving organizations across the 51 City Council districts. Residencies took place between January 1 and June 30, 2019. Art forms encompassed painting, graffiti art, botanical illustration, weaving, costume design, theater, singing, drumming, belly dance, poetry, photography, and more. Some arts organizations ran programs in more than one center—for example, the Afro-Latin Jazz Alliance of New York ran three programs in the Bronx, one in Manhattan, and one in Brooklyn; Queens Theatre in the Park was in residency at nine senior centers in Queens; and the New York Chinese Cultural Center taught at four centers, with programs in dance, calligraphy, and origami. Similarly, a few of the individual teaching artists (selected and assigned by the five borough arts councils) taught in multiple centers around the city.

Senior centers provide arts programs not only through SU-CASA but also through their sponsor organizations, through DFTA or City Council funds, or through grants arranged with specific arts organizations or other private or public funders. But centers have different levels of resources, and while some boast an abundance of programs year-round, others offer virtually no arts opportunities beyond SU-CASA—which takes place only between January and June each year.

SENIOR-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS WITH ENHANCED ARTS PROGRAMS

Innovative Senior Centers were developed as part of the Age-Friendly NYC initiative and charged with offering a wide array of services, including arts programming. There are now 16 such centers, including the **Center for Adults Living Well @ the Y**, which serves a mainly Latino clientele in Washington Heights and Inwood. Year-round arts programs, funded by DFTA, include such options as Latin dance, belly dance, painting, origami, beading, and quilting. Classes are not necessarily structured toward a culminating event. While some teaching artists are paid, other classes are led by volunteers who attend the center.

The **Carter Burden Network**, a senior-serving organization with strong support from foundations and corporations as well as local, state, and federal governments, runs a year-round program called Making Art Work. Classes include painting, ceramics, printmaking, sewing, quilt making, and making clothes. Participants show off the clothing and jewelry at annual fashion shows at Carter Burden/Leonard Covello Center and the Carter Burden Luncheon Club. Carter Burden also has a gallery in Chelsea that promotes the work of older professional artists in New York City.



Photo by Jeremy Amar

Besides providing housing and many other services for older adults, **JASA** runs 22 senior centers and 14 NORCS (naturally occurring retirement communities), many of which participate in SU-CASA and bring in arts programs from other sources. In addition, the organization offers its own long-running program, Sundays at JASA, which includes 10-week workshops in drawing, creative writing, and acting, as well as courses in history, current events, and arts appreciation. Courses cost \$185.

DOROT offers grant-funded programs aimed at reducing social isolation. Its chorus, Kol DOROT, is open to all older adults, meeting weekly and giving occasional public performances. Its Legacy Arts Workshops help older adults reflect on their lives through art. DOROT's Sirota Center for Intergenerational Arts is home to programs joining older adults with young people, including photography, textile and visual arts, and musical theater classes. And multiple-session teleconference courses are available through DOROT's University Without Walls.

COMMUNITY SERVICES

LIBRARIES

After SU-CASA, the broadest array of creative aging programs is found at the three library systems: Brooklyn, Queens, and the New York Public Library (NYPL), which covers Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island.

Over the past 10 years, Lifetime Arts has worked with all three library systems to build their capacity to run creative aging programs. With grants from the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services and private foundations in New York City, Lifetime Arts trained librarians and teaching artists in the principles of creative aging and developing a sequential curriculum. Lifetime Arts provided seed programming and helped the libraries make connections with teaching artists and develop community partnerships. Now, the library systems continue to offer a variety of programs rooted in creative aging principles, along with many other arts courses that are open to adults of all ages. Across the systems, demand exceeds supply, and programmers say sustainability is a challenge because the programs are funded by grants.

NYPL's grant-funded creative aging programs run from January to June. The library surveys its branches to gauge interest, then matches the branches with teaching artists. In 2019, the library offered courses across 35 branches in the Bronx, Manhattan, and Staten Island. Programs included poetry, memoir writing, crocheting and jewelry making, painting and other visual arts, and photo storytelling, and most ran for six weeks. In Fall 2019, Dances For A Variable Population offered its core dance class for older adults at one library branch.

The **Brooklyn Public Library** offers classes year-round that follow the principles of creative aging programs. The 8- to 10-week artist-led workshops follow a sequential learning model and include a culminating event. Designed for adults 50 and older, with no experience necessary, classes include theater and improvisation, singing and dance, painting and watercolor, ceramics, photography, non-fiction writing, and storytelling. In 2018, the library system served almost 700 older adults across 35 programs. Each branch selects its classes based on community input, and classes are available in Spanish, Chinese, Creole, Polish, Russian, Hebrew, and Japanese. For those who are homebound, the library works with DOROT's University Without Walls program to offer remote access courses as one-hour, four-session series. Students receive art supplies in the mail and participate in exercises during classes by phone or videoconference, then work on their projects between sessions.

As funding allows, the **Queens Public Library** offers sequential learning courses that follow the principles of creative aging: for example, a nine-week workshop in botanical watercolor painting. In fall 2019, two branches were home to Senior Theater Acting Repertory (STARS) programs. The library also offers many other multiweek courses open to all adults, from creative writing workshops to classical Chinese dance, as well as one-day workshops in a variety of art forms. Cultural activities are accessible to the homebound through the library's Mail-a-Book teleconference service.

COMMUNITY-FOCUSED ORGANIZATIONS

The **Jewish Community Center of Staten Island**, which provides programs for all ages, sponsors a Center for Life Long Development, funded by DFTA, that includes instruction in dance, music, theater, and visual and textile arts. Volunteer planning committees develop the programs, which are offered on a drop-in basis with a suggested contribution of \$2 or \$3 per class. Some teachers are paid; others are volunteers.

Council Lifetime Learning, offered to members of the National Council of Jewish Women, includes year-round classes in fine arts and performing arts designed to follow best practices in the field of

creative aging. Accordingly, programs include exercise and challenging activities and aim to promote mastery and social networks. The council budget comes from foundation and individual contributions, special events, and membership fees. A senior membership in NCJW NY is \$72, and class fees range from \$35 to \$200 per three-month semester. Scholarships are available for those who cannot pay.

One-of-a-kind programs—or familiar programs in unfamiliar locations—may spring up anytime there is sufficient interest and funding and a place to work. Seniors in Motion is one example: Detective Josie Ruiz, of the **New York Police Department’s Community Affairs Bureau**, got the idea to approach Pregones / Puerto Rican Traveling Theater to engage the older adults in her service area. Detective Ruiz and Pregones worked together to start a program at the Frederick Samuel Community Center in Harlem. Each spring, a group of 4 to 10 participants create their own musical and build toward a performance.

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The Creative Center at University Settlement offers artist-in-residence programs in hospitals and health care sites across New York City and beyond, aiming to relieve patients’ pain, anxiety, and boredom. It also holds arts workshops in literary, visual, and performing arts that are free to people of all ages who have or have survived cancer or other chronic illnesses. The center, which receives federal and local government, foundation, and corporate funding, has expanded into creative aging and places artists in residence at various locations serving older adults.

Dance for PD was created by the Mark Morris Dance Group and the Brooklyn Parkinson Group to offer tailored dance classes to people with Parkinson’s and their families and friends. The Mark Morris Dance Group now administers the program with support from foundations, individuals, and city and state agencies and elected officials. More than 600 people participate in weekly classes across 10 locations in New York City, and master classes and teacher training workshops have been held across the nation and beyond.

Arts & Minds is a museum-based visual arts program that aims to make museums and other cultural institutions more welcoming places for people with dementia and their families. Participants view and discuss works in the museum and then make art of their own. By encouraging meaningful engagement in museums, the program also has the potential to promote socialization rather than stigma for individuals with dementia. The organization depends on grants and contributions, including through employer matching programs.

ARTS AND EDUCATION

Astoria Performing Arts Center (APAC) has a mission is to bring high-quality theater to Astoria and to support the neighborhood’s young people and older adults. APAC has received funding from the



Photo by Jeremy Amar

Department of Cultural Affairs, the Department for the Aging, and Council Member Costa Constantinides for an annual talent show, Senior Stars, for 13 years. APAC recruits in and around senior centers in the neighborhood.

Through a Catalyzing Creative Aging grant from the National Guild for Community Arts Education, which seeks to encourage organizations to launch creative aging programs, **Bloomington School of Music** received training from Lifetime Arts to pilot a 12-week introductory guitar class. Bloomington partnered with Morningside Retirement and Health Services, a NORC, which hosted the class and the culminating event.

The **Lucy Moses School** at the Kaufman Music Center offers private lessons and classes in singing, jazz, chamber music, and ballet at all levels. The city's largest community arts school, Lucy Moses has a dozen adult classes designated as "senior-friendly," including a Dalcroze Eurythmics dance class specifically aimed at older adults. Tuition varies but averages \$325, and there is a senior discount. The Kaufman Music Center covers costs through ticket sales, tuition, and donations.

Teachers and Writers Collaborative (T&W) took over some of the Legacy Arts and History Alive programs created by the pioneering organization Elders Share the Arts, which shut down in 2018 after 40 years. While T&W primarily provides writing residencies in public schools, supported by public and private funds, the organization ran seven creative aging programs at senior centers in summer 2019, including two SU-CASA programs. Some programs involved visual arts (collage and

sculpture) and others creative writing; one program teaches poetry and storytelling for the visually impaired.

In their role as civic institutions, **colleges and universities** are an option for intergenerational arts instruction. By New York State law, all state residents age 60 or older can apply to audit undergraduate courses at state-affiliated campuses (the City University of New York and State University of New York systems), as long as space is available. (Degree students have first priority.) At CUNY colleges, the only charge consists of processing fees, usually \$80 per semester. The fees and rules for SUNY schools, such as Empire State College and the Fashion Institute of Technology, differ by school. Some private schools, such as the Pratt Institute and Juilliard, offer a senior discount on continuing education courses.

ORGANIZATIONS WHOSE MISSION IS CREATIVE AGING

For a few organizations, inviting older adults to become more involved in the arts is at the core of their mission. **Dances For A Variable Population** (DVP) was founded by Naomi Goldberg Haas to promote creative movement for people of all ages, but with a focus on older adults. DVP has several programs, funded by city agencies and council members, state and federal grants, nonprofit organizations (including parks conservancies), and private foundations. The organization has served more than 5,000 people at 45 senior centers since 2009; classes are also held at libraries, at dance studios, and in public parks. Its core program, MOVEMENT SPEAKS®, involves sequential dance instruction culminating in a public performance of participants' original work.

Encore Creativity for Older Adults is a national nonprofit choral organization dedicated to promoting arts education and performance opportunities for individuals over age 55. Its New York programs, Encore ROCKS NYC and New York City Encore chorale, are held at the Third Street Music School Settlement. Tuition is \$295 for 15 weeks of classes; the programs are also supported by government grants, foundation grants, and AARP sponsorship.

THE CHALLENGE OF FUNDING

As described above, arts programs for older adults receive funding from both public and private sources. Beyond the New York City Council's funding of SU-CASA, a patchwork of other public agencies and officials contribute to various programs:

- NYC Department for the Aging
- NYC Department of Cultural Affairs
- NYC Department of Youth & Community Development
- NYC Department of Education
- NYC Department of Correction
- Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs
- Borough arts councils
- State and local elected officials

- New York State Council on the Arts
- New York State Department of Education
- National Endowment for the Arts

Funding can be precarious for cultural organizations, especially those that lack a stable base of earned income. Few have creative aging programs written into their budget. Each organization has its own mix of funding sources, and the mixtures have changed over the years, according to Stacey McMath of the Department of Cultural Affairs: government funding has been shrinking as a percentage of organization budgets, as less money is slated for arts programs and more organizations compete for it.

Sustaining creative aging programs was the greatest challenge cited by providers in our research. Representatives of several organizations said they would like to do more—extend a program to more centers, run it year-round, or offer it more consistently. Organizations must continually pursue grants and other funding, and grants can be restrictive. Providers sometimes expressed the wish to expand staff capacity or improve their facilities, which grants may not cover.

THE CHALLENGE OF MARKETING

Marketing an arts program for older adults, like any other program, requires some dedicated effort. Even the SU-CASA program, despite its size and broad range, lacks a brand identity; some senior center directors and most participants are unfamiliar with the SU-CASA name. Senior center members seem to experience it simply as an arts offering at their senior center, and they learn about the program through announcements at the center, or sometimes through friends.

Program directors without a regular clientele of older adults use various methods to get the word out. These methods usually include the distribution of brochures or fliers to local senior centers, library branches, and sometimes churches and supermarkets. Libraries and large community organizations may have catalogs. The Queens Public Library, for example, issues a magazine every two months, full of articles and a full listing of programs by branch.

Programs are usually promoted via websites and social media as well—but people searching for program listings on websites may not have an easy time finding what they want. The library systems offer so many programs of so many kinds, at so many locations, that it can be difficult to get an overview of what participatory arts programs are available where.

Organizations also market their programs through elected officials and at community meetings, through press releases, and through their own mailing lists—as well as word of mouth. Some cultural organizations, such as Queens Theatre, send staff members to visit senior centers in person.

Cultural organizations may find it hard to recruit participants in the absence of a built-in social structure, and senior-serving organizations may have difficulty expanding their potential audience beyond their current members. Partnerships are valuable in this regard. For that matter, raising the profile of creative aging as a whole—so New York City recognizes it as “a thing”—could benefit providers across the board, the way a Restaurant Row can draw an influx of customers to an area.



Photo by Jeremy Amar

At the same time, it's possible to have too much publicity. Dina Zempsky, a senior program officer at DOROT, acknowledged that “we have to be mindful how to market the programs” so that demand does not exceed capacity. At the libraries, popular programs often fill up fast, leaving patrons frustrated at being shut out.

FOSTERING PARTICIPATION

Creative aging programs in New York City, available primarily at senior centers and libraries, succeed in serving older adults in a broad range of income brackets and from a variety of ethnic and cultural groups. The SU-CASA program provides five arts programs in each City Council district, ensuring that every area has some kind of creative aging opportunity. But while such programs are geographically accessible, there may be other barriers that prevent older adults from participating.

Senior centers have advantages and disadvantages as venues for creative aging. Because of the meals and social services they provide, their clientele includes some of the older adults who are most in need. They are also a site for social networks, so positive word of mouth can spread. Yet the facilities and resources available to those centers are far from equal. In a city where immigrants constitute half of the 65+ population, some centers lack the capacity to serve all neighborhood residents in their native languages. And many older adults do not picture themselves in senior centers; only 11% of

older New Yorkers attend them (González-Rivera, Bowles, & Dvorkin, forthcoming). Age-related stigma may prevent some individuals from attending a program labeled “creative aging.”

Other potential barriers to participation include a lack of space in the classes and a lack of adequate transportation. Older adults must also have a way to hear about the programs—not just that they exist, but what they are for, whom they are for, and what it means to participate. Older adults should have a voice in the development of programs.

Given that some programs cannot meet demand and others don’t manage to fill their slots, it is likely that different barriers exist in different parts of the city. In Staten Island, according to Elizabeth Bennett of Staten Island Arts, there is a shortage of teaching artists who are trained in creative aging. In the SU-CASA program, there were language barriers between some teaching artists and the senior center participants. And Detective Josie Ruiz of the NYPD Community Affairs program said that the need to provide transportation was what kept her from opening her theater program to older adults from other parts of the city. We do not know how many older adults would participate in creative aging programs but for barriers like these.

Stronger collaboration among senior-serving organizations, other community organizations, and arts organizations might help alleviate some of these barriers. With better marketing of programs, individuals shut out of a program in one location might find a similar one nearby, and non-English-speakers might more easily find—or spur the creation of—a program in their language.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the essential ingredients for creative aging are artists, older adults, a place to play, some source of support, and someone who decides it’s going to get done. Organizations with different priorities, strengths, and resources will take different approaches. Yet they share the challenges of establishing reliable funding and making sure their programs reach their intended participants. As programs mature and providers learn from each other, the pathway to creative aging should grow broader, and more older adults will have the opportunity to experience the joy of making art together.

FOCUS GROUPS WITH SU-CASA PARTICIPANTS

By Janeide Demergis • Fondell Jones • Martha Marin • Jonathan Martínez • Princess Smith • Jennie Kaufman

INTRODUCTION

This report covers the field research conducted by the Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging in the second year of the NYC Creative Aging Initiative. The New York Community Trust funded the initiative to strengthen and advance the field of creative aging in New York City, with a focus on the SU-CASA arts program.

In 2018, Brookdale observed SU-CASA programs and interviewed senior center staff members and teaching artists. In 2019, Brookdale conducted a series of focus groups. The goal of the focus groups was to hear the perspectives of older adults in SU-CASA programs: What brought them to the classes? What did they get out of the classes? And what would make SU-CASA the best it can be?

The research team visited SU-CASA programs at senior centers in each of the five boroughs in order to hear from a diverse cross section of participants. Responses were overwhelmingly positive. Focus group participants appreciated the new friendships they made at the senior centers, and especially the camaraderie of classes where they shared their creativity. They spoke of being rejuvenated and of reinventing themselves, sometimes after periods of sickness or struggle. Whether honing their skills or developing unexpected new ones, they were proud of their efforts and accomplishments.

Few if any participants recognized the name “SU-CASA,” and in some cases their responses referred to their experience at the senior center, rather than the particular SU-CASA class. But other comments reflect SU-CASA’s emphasis on fostering their own creativity. In one of the singing groups, for example, the older adults composed melodies while singing their names, and wrote a song together in which each stanza tells one of their stories. Sharing those stories brought them together. In the theater groups, the performers developed their own shows. In the graffiti art class, students brought a visual component to their identities by creating their own tags.

There were also differences between groups: in their expectations for their retirement years and in the resources each center had to offer. While some participants reveled in a wonderful breadth of activities—such as the man who joined a center for the swimming, but said, “I find it hard getting to the pool with all the singing classes”—others had to make do in noisy or cramped spaces. Yet all emphasized how much they appreciated the program.

Participants often spoke of seeing themselves in a new light. Two people noted the transformative effect of putting a frame around their artwork; as one said, “The frame makes it vivid.” This is a useful analogy for the potential of creative aging programs to render the talents of older adults visible to themselves, their families, and the wider community.

SCOPE AND METHODS

The focus groups covered six SU-CASA programs across New York City in June 2019: one flamenco dance class, two theater classes, two singing classes, and one class in graffiti art. Three programs were conducted by independent teaching artists, and three were represented by cultural organizations. The programs were held at the CCNS Dellamonica-Steinway Senior Center, Queens; Diana H. Jones Innovative Senior Center, Brooklyn; Hope of Israel Senior Center and Mid-Bronx Senior Citizens Council, the Bronx; the JCC Center for Life Long Development, Staten Island; and PSS Harlem Center, Manhattan. A total of 27 women and 8 men participated in the focus groups. Table B.1 presents a demographic profile of the focus groups as a whole.

The research team observed five of the six classes and, in four cases, conducted the focus group after the class. In one case, the focus group was held before the class, and in one case, the focus group was held during class time but one week after the class had concluded. Because all groups were reaching the end of the program, respondents consisted of the most persistent attendees or, in a few cases, individuals who joined later in the term. Most but not all class participants who were present on that day joined the focus groups.

The focus groups consisted of semi-structured interviews. Two students took notes during each group and then combined their notes. Notes were then coded, and the predominant themes were identified and discussed among the research team.

MAIN THEMES

PARTICIPANTS CAME TO SENIOR CENTERS FOR SOCIAL INTERACTION AND ACTIVITY.

Most of the focus group participants were regular members of their neighborhood senior centers. It was not uncommon for individuals to say they regularly visited more than one senior center, shopping around for different activities. Respondents in all groups mentioned exercise and social activities as a reason for joining. One woman found the center when she needed a place to take her 87-year-old mother while she was at work. Her mother “just came alive, she was so happy.” Others eagerly sought out the classes as soon as they retired.

Respondents wanted to avoid isolation at home after retirement. “I didn’t want to stay in the house and watch Judge Judy after I retired,” said a woman in one of the theater groups. A flamenco class participant said, “Las paredes embrutecen” (*The walls dull your senses*). In contrast, the Saturday dance parties at the senior center were “like going to a club.”

Table B.1. Demographic profile of SU-CASA focus group participants

Characteristic	Percentage
Borough of residence	
Bronx	38
Brooklyn	15
Manhattan	9
Queens	18
Staten Island	21
Female	76
Age	
61-65	12
66-70	26
71-75	26
76-80	15
81-85	12
No response ^a	9
Race/ethnicity ^b	
White	24
Black	32
Hispanic/Latino	29
Asian/Pacific Islander	6
Multiracial	9
Language spoken at home	
English	62
Spanish	3
English and Spanish	26
Other	9
Marital status	
Single/never married	21
Married	26
Widowed	15
Divorced/separated	32
No response ^a	6
Household composition	
Lives alone	47
Lives with spouse/partner, with or without others	24
Lives with other family members and/or other people	29
Highest level of education	
Did not graduate high school	6
High school graduate/GED	12
Trade/vocational training	3
Some college	29
College graduate	44
No response ^a	6
Source of income ^c	
Social Security	85
Pension	59
Work	12
Other	3
No response ^a	12
Attends center for other activities	
Yes	94
No	0
No response ^a	6

Sample size = 34

^a Two respondents did not complete the back of the survey, which included the questions on age, marital status, education, income, and center and SU-CASA attendance.

^b Race/ethnicity categories were White, Hispanic/Latino, Black or African American, Native American/American Indian, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Other. Participants who chose more than one category are classified as multiracial.

^c Participants could choose more than one category, so percentages do not sum to 100.

Many participants were already quite active when they signed up for the class. While some said they appreciated the class and the center for giving them something to do, others said they were already very busy—even busier than before they retired. Some were pursuing other interests: “I got myself involved in so many things that I wanted to do . . . now I can’t find any time,” one man said. Yet the SU-CASA classes were worth making the effort. A woman in one of the theater groups said, “I took time for this, because I learn so much.” Besides the social component, she said, “it brings out your talents.”

PARTICIPANTS OFTEN BONDED IN THE ARTS CLASSES.

The classes tended to create a community. Participating in an arts class together turned the older adults into a group, even in the graffiti art class, which did not involve collaboration on a performance. In one singing class, participants wrote songs together about their childhood stories. A woman said the songs created a community. “We come together, to be accepted, and it is very important.” Respondents often grew attached not only to their classmates but to the teacher: “She is very, very good. She is super special,” said a theater group member. One singer was getting back into music after years of doing other things. She was also taking lessons, but she said of her SU-CASA class, “This is the best way, to play music with other people.” Friendships extended beyond the class and beyond the senior center. Members of one group visited jazz clubs and open-mic events together, for example, and others ate lunch together and stayed connected via social media.

Relationships can be a powerful motivation to persist in class. A woman in the flamenco class reported getting up early, leaving at 8 a.m. for a 9:30 class, because her friend pushed her—like “boot camp”—and came to pick her up. In one of the theater groups, a woman said, “knowing that I have to come here, it makes me get up.” Another said, “I come, I walk slowly, but I come.”

The groups varied in their level of commitment to the class. Commitment was especially strong in one of the theater groups. “I take it seriously—I’m busy, things to do, but I love this.” Members of that group said that others who had dropped out were not able to spare the time, in some cases because they had taken part-time jobs. “You have to be involved to put this together,” one man explained. But in a different class that was preparing for its upcoming performance, a senior center field trip had lured away some members that day.

Men as well as women value the social connections. Women greatly outnumber men in creative aging programs, and there is a longstanding assumption that men are less likely to seek out social contact. Among the six focus groups in this evaluation, two were exclusively female, although only one class (flamenco) was exclusively female. Women consistently spoke of the social impetus, but most of the men did as well. While one man in a singing class declared “men are not social,” he also said that the social aspect of the senior center was important to him, and that he had finally persuaded his wife to attend. “There is a social setting that you need, we all need,” he said. Another man in the class agreed: “Meeting so many people—I love that most of all.” One man in a theater group said with a smile, “I got roped into doing this program,” but another liked that the class required interaction with the other group members, as opposed to tai chi or computer classes, which he could do alone. In the other theater group, the lone man said the group had made him more open. “I enjoy the people. There’s a lot of wisdom and strong ladies.”

THE CLASSES HELPED PARTICIPANTS REJECT STEREOTYPES OF OLD AGE.

Many individuals expressed that they didn't feel old when they were active and engaged. A flamenco class member said, "It is not the wrinkles that make you old, it is your heart." She came to the center, she said, "to have a better life, because our life has not finished—a new dimension has started." One woman urged others to persist: "Keep going, you can do it. I feel like a 15-year-old, I'm 72." Another member of the group said that when she hears the flamenco guitar, "it makes me young and beautiful."

Some women, especially Latinas, told of going against the expectations their families had for their old age. "They treat us like we are dead," one woman stated. "Some are sick," her classmate conceded, "but we're not dead." A woman in the flamenco class reported that her daughter had said, "Mom, you're acting like a teenager. What's going on?"

While they were proud of their grandchildren, they had mixed feelings about being expected to babysit. One woman refused to be the de facto babysitter: "I did my job already with my child." Another said, "I don't mind helping out, but I also get to go out."

They also spoke of family support. One participant shared her granddaughter's words: "Grandma, you're not old, you're just Grandma." She told of being invited out by her teenage grandchildren and giving them dance lessons, and said going out with them "is like a treasure for me."

THE PROGRAMS MADE PARTICIPANTS FEEL BETTER BOTH PHYSICALLY AND EMOTIONALLY.

Participants spoke of physical benefits. Respondents in the flamenco dance class believed the class had helped them with their arthritis, joint pain, and osteoporosis, and they took other dance classes as well. The theater and music groups incorporated stretches and vocal warm-ups. A man in a singing group indicated that simply being engaged had health benefits: "I know that if I do music it will help—I will live longer."

"We have fun" was a common theme. Members of the singing groups called their classes "calming" and "relaxing," but also "stimulating." The experience "is a happy thing, we are not depressed, we feel good," one woman explained.

Some participants noticed improvements in themselves. One participant said that before she became involved with art classes, "I was really depressed, antisocial." Now she likes her classmates: "I am learning to respect them. I want to be like them." A woman in a theater group said the class "built up my confidence. Confidence on stage helped in other aspects of life."

Some of the perceived benefits were cognitive. A theater group member said that learning her lines was good for her memory. A woman in a singing group also noted the value of having her "brain working" in order to stay sharp.

ARTS CLASSES OFFERED AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REINVENTION.

“Reinvention” was a word used by participants across the groups. For some women, SU-CASA and other arts classes are a part of a transformation they are undergoing now that they are widowed or divorced. One woman in the flamenco class told of her love of the guitar when she was young, but said her husband made her give it up so she wouldn’t attract attention from other men. “My guitar was buried in the graveyard,” she declared. After visiting a senior center for guitar lessons and then becoming an instructor herself, she said passionately, “My guitar is out of the grave. The center gave me my life back.”

Reinvention for some was intentional; for others, their new abilities came as a surprise. One woman had always wanted to be a dancer: “A dream came true, this flamenco class.” A woman in a singing group said, “I saw the guitar and I said, that’s it. I’m going to reinvent myself.” But in other



Photo by Julia Xanthos Liddy

cases, senior center members had doubted their abilities, and instructors had to persuade them to participate. “When I saw that it said composing, I said whoa, that’s not me,” one woman said. But the teacher eased them into it. A woman in the graffiti art class said, “I say I can’t do it and the next thing I know I’m doing it.” She said the work was “hard, hard, hard . . . but not that hard.” One of her classmates also expressed surprise at the end result, saying, “Sometimes I just stare at my work.”

Participants enjoyed the opportunity to tap into their creativity. One woman said she joined the theater group “because I wanted to express myself—I’m kind of shy in a large group.” In theater, she said, “You can take different characters, you can be anything that you want to be, you can be a monster, anything.” In one singing group, a woman stated, “We are becoming great musicians.” A theater participant said, “We are becoming actors.”

PARTICIPANTS WERE PROUD TO SHOW THEIR TALENTS AND MAKE A CONTRIBUTION.

Many focus group participants took pride in their work. “We’ve been accused of being professionals,” admitted one man in a theater group. One of his classmates said, “I feel beautiful here, because I am the artist.” A member of the group invited the research team to their final event and said, “You thought we were good now—the final product is going to be amazing!”

“Sharing your gifts with others is an opportunity,” said one of the theater performers. Likewise, one flamenco dancer said, “I have something to contribute” by giving a show.

For many, the quality of the work was important. Some older adults were intent on increasing their mastery of the art form and appreciated the fact that their teacher didn’t baby them. “I love the singing,” said a theater group member who had not had professional training. “I learned so much from this teacher. The drama class helped me with my technique.”

Inspiration came from their classmates as well. A man in a singing class acknowledged “some healthy competition” among the group. A theater participant said that after seeing what his classmates could do, he thought, “Oh boy, I have to raise my level.” His classmates nodded as he explained, “If I do less, I diminish what he does.”

PARTICIPANTS LOVED THEIR CLASSES, BUT THEY NEEDED MORE SPACE.

Focus group participants were overwhelmingly enthusiastic about the program. Some said they wished it would continue. “I don’t want the program to end because there’s so much more to learn,” said one graffiti artist. Some worried that the program would not return the next year. But opinions were mixed on whether they would rather have a year-round program. One group of theater participants in particular felt that once a year was enough because of the intense commitment required.

Space was often inadequate. When asked how the program could be improved, the most common answer was “We need more space.” In three of the senior centers, classes were normally held in the large main room where lunch was served. One class, held just before lunchtime, had to end early because the noise from the gathering crowd drowned out the singers. While there was another space

available on another level at the center, the piano could not be moved. In addition, a cleaning bucket was sometimes parked near the class area, and the cleanser fumes made one of the participants feel dizzy.

In one center with one large room, the class sometimes decamped to the building lobby upstairs. Participants took the limitations in stride: “Everything is in that room—dominoes, exercise—but we manage.” Another center limited the number of class participants to just a handful because of tight space. And even at the most well-equipped center visited, participants saw a shortage of space as preventing them from having more classes.

Artists asked for more supplies. While instructors and centers provided props and equipment, programs did not all have the same access to resources. In the art class, focus group participants wanted more supplies, so they would not have to buy their own. And some members of one theater group were eager for painting or sculpture classes, with funds “to provide a frame, to enhance the art.”

Despite such shortcomings, focus group participants celebrated their experience. In the words of the song performed by the group at the Dellamonica Senior Center:

*Now I am older
I had a beautiful life
I have everything I need
Dellamonica life!*

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON CREATIVE AGING

Over the past 15 years or so, a growing body of research has investigated the potential for arts programs to contribute to various aspects of healthy aging—by reducing social isolation, improving physical and mental health, keeping older adults active, and providing them with opportunities to thrive, grow, and continue to make contributions to their communities.

Research supports these potential benefits, but the research has limitations. There are few rigorous studies, such as random assignment studies, and there is a lack of diversity in study samples, making it hard to generalize the findings to a diverse population like New York City's. Qualitative research reveals an abundance of positive assessments from participants, and these are important. But the details of who is studied and how leave a lot of open questions, including effects on those who drop out and the influence of self-selection on outcomes.

This review of the literature does not cover the entire field of arts and aging. With the aim of informing creative aging programs, it focuses on the benefits of participatory arts programs for a broad population.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CREATIVE AGING?

At its core, *creative aging* refers to arts engagement by older adults, or the development of artistic skills. In the creative aging field, more specifically, the term describes “professionally conducted, community-based cultural programs” that offer sequential instruction in performance, visual art, creative writing, or other cultural domains (Cohen et al., 2006, p. 726). A focus on mastery and professional instruction distinguishes creative aging programs from arts and crafts sessions designed to occupy the hands and fill up time. As creative aging advocates Michael C. Patterson and Susan Perlstein put it, “Artistic activities go farther and engage the mind, body, and emotions, sparking curiosity, problem solving, and artistic accomplishment” (Patterson & Perlstein, 2011, p. 28). This engagement may in turn improve health and well-being.

New York City's SU-CASA program follows this model. Artists in residence at senior centers conduct programs extending over several weeks, drawing on and encouraging participants' creativity and culminating in a public performance or exhibition. For example, a program might involve choral training and rehearsals for a public concert, a play written and performed by participants, or costume design for the annual Afro-Caribbean parade.

Creative aging is more than a way to promote healthy aging or delay cognitive decline. One influential early program, Elders Share the Arts, in Brooklyn, grew out of an effort to combat negative stereotypes of older adults—to show that older people can still contribute to the community (Jeffri & Hanna, 2016; Bernard & Rickett, 2017). Participants not only benefit but also provide cultural value. Creative aging programs thus have the potential to reduce loneliness and isolation and promote intergenerational connections, improving the landscape for a good old age—and strengthening communities in the process.

Not all arts programs for older adults fall into this definition of creative aging, though they may also have benefits. Crafting sessions that serve as “busy work,” or coloring-book sessions designed as stress relief, do not meet the generally accepted criteria in the field. Likewise, cultural outings and arts appreciation classes can be socially and mentally stimulating and may inspire creativity, but *participation* is a key criterion in the creative aging literature.

WHAT IS THE SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH ON ARTS AND AGING?

The research on arts and aging spans an array of programs and outcomes, from studies of how art therapy can benefit people with dementia to brain imaging studies of neurological changes in piano students. The literature on art therapy is extensive, especially where Alzheimer’s disease and other forms of dementia are concerned. There is a smaller body of what can be termed “wellness studies,” which focus on the potential of arts participation to enhance cognitive, physical, or psychological health (Noice, Noice, & Kramer, 2014).

Arts programs are thought to contribute to healthy aging through a number of mechanisms:

- “A heightened sense of control, mastery or efficacy” and/or strong social support could improve immune system functioning (Cohen, 2009, p. 49).
- The learning or training component takes advantage of brain plasticity to sharpen cognition in several ways, potentially affecting memory, problem-solving, and verbal fluency, depending on the art form (Alain et al., 2019).
- The physical component may help improve balance and reduce falls, as well as stimulating neural growth (Kattenstroth, Kalisch, Holt, Tegenthoff, & Dinse, 2013).
- The social component can reduce loneliness, improve mood, and increase motivation (Johnson et al., 2020; Coulton, Clift, Skingley, & Rodriguez, 2015).
- Absorption in an artistic endeavor may promote concentration and a sense of calm (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2018).
- Even if art programs that foster creativity do not prevent the changes that go along with aging, they may help people cope with those changes, and with challenges such as chronic pain (Phinney, Moody, & Small, 2014).

The evidence for these hypotheses varies in quantity and quality. Much of the research concerns fairly small, exploratory programs; very few studies (Coulton et al., 2015; Noice, Noice, & Staines, 2004; Noice & Noice, 2009, 2013; Johnson et al., 2020) use a random assignment design with a large sample.



Photo by Julia Xanthos Liddy

The research on arts programs for older adults has several limitations:

- Samples tend to be small and homogenous—primarily comprising middle-class white women.
- Random assignment studies are few; some studies have no comparison group at all.
- In the qualitative research on these arts programs, it is common to find participants reporting benefits, but those who dropped out of a program are seldom surveyed, resulting in a biased sample.
- It is hard to assess the effects of art specifically, given the demonstrated benefits of programs that increase social engagement, because virtually no studies compare group arts instruction with individual arts training, or compare group arts instruction with a different kind of class.
- Research is also lacking on the practical aspects, such as the necessary duration of a program, what components make programs work, whether programs are cost-effective, to what degree they can be scaled up, and what prevents more people from participating.

There is little question that arts programs encourage social engagement and that social engagement has substantial benefits for older adults. It is also well established that brain systems can still respond to training in older age. Research has supported the other benefits as well, but less consistently. And where positive outcomes are found, few study designs are rigorous enough to prove that it was the

arts program that made the difference. This does not mean that programs don't work. But the interaction between physical, psychological, and social benefits and the personal nature of arts engagement is dauntingly complex.

FOCUS OF THIS REVIEW

The literature scan began with a search for keywords “creative aging” and “art + aging” in Hunter College Library databases and Google Scholar, and continued by following related bibliography entries of the articles reviewed.

Most of the research included here concerns programs that involve mastery and social engagement, but it often focuses on learning rather than creativity. Some studies have focused on the specific cognitive, physical, or psychological benefits of certain art forms—especially music, dance, and theater. This review excludes art therapy programs and programs designed for specific populations, such as individuals with dementia or older adults who suffer from depression.

The following sections present an overview of the related research. First we review the strongest evidence, involving random assignment, followed by studies at a lower level of rigor, and finally studies with interesting exploratory findings that call for further research. Following that, we summarize what is known and suspected in terms of the benefits of creative aging programs, and what questions still need answers. We conclude with a discussion of gaps and limitations in the research.

STUDIES WITH STRONG RESEARCH DESIGNS

The strongest research, incorporating random assignment in a large sample, has focused on theater, dance, and singing programs. In addition, a brain imaging study examined music students, visual arts students, and a comparison group. These studies tend to focus on either the effects of learning (especially with cognitive outcomes) or social participation; none of the programs studied by random assignment emphasized creativity.

COGNITIVE EFFECTS OF THEATER PROGRAMS

- A series of well-designed studies found that at the end of a tailored theater program, older adult participants had higher scores than a control group on personal growth, problem solving, verbal fluency, and three out of four memory tests (Noice et al., 2004; Noice & Noice, 2009, 2013).

The most thorough discussion of what a specific art program involves and how it is intended to work comes from Helga Noice and Tony Noice, who have done a series of studies of theater programs, using random assignment to compare the cognitive effects of these programs with other arts-related interventions and control groups. With the goal of producing effects that would be transferable to other cognitive domains, they designed a four-week theatrical program in which the participant is expected to experience a role through the thoughts, emotions, and physical expressions and movement it involves (Noice et al., 2004).

The researchers have compared participants in their program not only with control groups but with a visual arts appreciation group (2004) and a singing group (2009), which helps to clarify the effects of participation in acting exercises rather than simply participation in a group cultural activity.

In the 2004 study of 124 community-dwelling older adults, the theater group took part in a four-week program practicing the core process of acting, without requiring memorization, to focus on conveying the meaning of the dialogue. The visual arts group examined works by different artists in different media, speculating on the artist's intent and discussing their reactions. The theater group scored higher than the visual arts appreciation group on problem solving and made greater improvements in word recall and problem solving than the control group (Noice et al., 2004).

In the 2009 study, which involved 122 older adults from subsidized senior housing complexes near Chicago, the theater group took part in a four-week program similar to the earlier one. Like the theater group, the singing group was dedicated to "the most important fundamental concepts" of its discipline, involving breathing techniques, vocal exercises, and performing well-known songs. The theater group had higher scores than either the control group or the singing group on problem solving, verbal fluency, and three out of four memory tests. Both the theater and singing groups had greater gains in personal growth than the control group (Noice & Noice, 2009).

In a 2013 study, the researchers trained retirement home activity directors and professional acting teachers to conduct the program and obtained similar results. In addition, theater participants improved in a test of managing finances and medications, while control group members did not (Noice & Noice, 2013).

PSYCHOSOCIAL BENEFITS OF CHORAL PROGRAMS

- In a random assignment study of 390 older adults in senior centers in the San Francisco area, participants in a 44-week choir program experienced a reduction in loneliness and increased interest in life after six months (Johnson et al., 2020).

In a cluster randomized trial, researchers tested the effects of the 44-week Community of Voices choir program on health, well-being, and health care costs. Six senior centers in the San Francisco area were randomly assigned to the choir program, while six others were placed on a waiting list for the program; 390 older adults participated in the study. After six months, choir members experienced greater improvements in loneliness and interest in life than the control group did. The program did not, however, result in significant differences in tests of memory and executive function, or in lower body strength, balance, or gait speed. Nor were there significant differences in health care costs (Johnson et al., 2020).

- In a large random assignment study in England, a three-month community singing program resulted in improved mental health and reduced levels of depression and anxiety (Coulton et al., 2015).

This study examined whether a community singing program led to better mental and physical health. The study involved 265 adults age 60 and older, about half of whom were randomly assigned to one of five 12-week singing groups led by experienced musicians. The others continued their normal

activities, but were offered the chance to join a singing group after six months. The researchers administered questionnaires at the start of the program, at the end of it, and three months after that, using validated scales for anxiety, depression, and other components of quality of life. They also measured health care use. At the end of the program, choir members reported better mental health and reduced levels of depression and anxiety compared with the control group, although the effects had faded somewhat three months after the program ended. There was no significant difference in physical health or health care use (Coulton et al., 2015).

COGNITIVE AND PHYSICAL BENEFITS OF DANCE PROGRAMS

- In a Dutch study of 35 older adults, those randomly assigned to a six-month weekly dance course performed better than control group members in several cognitive domains (including memory, attention, and nonverbal learning) and on two physical measures (hand-motor skills and posture) (Kattenstroth et al., 2013).



Photo by Jeremy Amar

A small random assignment study of neural plasticity involving 35 older adults examined the effects of a six-month weekly dance course on a range of outcomes, including cognition, intelligence, attention, reaction time, motor skills, tactile performance, and posture, self-reported well-being, and cardiorespiratory performance. The dance class did not emphasize creativity but did involve learning steps of increasing complexity. Adults in the dance course had improved cognitive performance in the areas of memory, attention, nonverbal learning, and reaction times, as well as hand-motor skills, tactile performance, and posture, while control group members did not improve. The dancers also reported changes in well-being, with three-quarters saying they felt better. Surprisingly, however, cardiorespiratory performance did not improve (Kattenstroth et al., 2013).

- An aerobic dance course in Hong Kong led to cardiopulmonary benefits in participants, compared with the control group (Hui, Chui, & Woo, 2009).

A study in Hong Kong examined the effect of dancing on physical health and quality of life. The researchers recruited 111 older adults who were not regular dancers and divided them into two groups, then randomly assigned the groups to a 12-week low-impact aerobic dance course or a control group. (The course had no emphasis on art or creativity.) The researchers then measured the pre- and postintervention changes for each group. Compared with the control group, the dancers showed more physical improvement in some areas, such as resting heart rate and cardiopulmonary performance, but not on others. The dancers also reported more improvement in general health, and four out of five members of the dancing group said “dancing was very or extremely helpful in improving their psychological well-being” (Hui et al., 2009, p. e48), even though no difference was found in the quantitative measures of psychological health. The authors suggest that the social aspect of the group may have contributed to that finding.

EFFECTS OF ARTS TRAINING ON BRAIN ACTIVITY

- Neuroimaging shows that the learning component of music or visual art training can boost brain plasticity and lead to changes in older adults’ brain function, potentially improving essential cognitive skills such as processing speed (Alain et al., 2019).

In a longitudinal study of 53 older adults in the Greater Toronto area, Alain et al. (2019) examined the effects of short-term music and visual art training on brain function, as measured before and after the program by a neuropsychological assessment and neuroelectric brain activity. Participants were assigned in a pseudorandom manner to groups receiving three months of classroom training in either music or visual arts. To account for potential training effects, the researchers recruited a comparison group that received no instruction. In the psychometric assessments, which included tests of verbal comprehension, verbal memory, and cognitive processing speed, neither the music nor the visual arts program showed an impact. In the electroencephalographic (EEG) testing, however, the researchers observed brain changes in the area of inhibitory control and auditory and visual processing in both training groups. In addition, the visual art and music training had different and specific effects on auditory and visual systems. The authors acknowledge that the changes were modest, but they interpret the findings as “clear causal evidence that the aged brain is more plastic than traditionally thought” (Alain et al., 2019, p. 13).

LESS STRONG QUANTITATIVE EVIDENCE

A small experiment in Florida sought to learn whether individual piano instruction would be likely to preserve cognitive function in older adults. Thirty-one older adults without neurological impairments were randomized to six months of weekly individual piano instruction or to a control group that received no program. The piano students showed measurable gains in attention, concentration, planning, and memory in neuropsychological assessments at the end of the program. After students were told not to practice for three months, they were tested again, and not all gains were sustained. It is unknown to what degree the individual attention, rather than the piano training itself, contributed to the results. While the study is promising, it had a high attrition rate; eight participants (20%) who were randomly assigned did not complete the study. Some had health problems; some did not stick to the instruction; and some withdrew at the start because they had a strong preference for the group (experimental or control) they were not assigned to (Bugos, Perlstein, McCrae, Brophy, & Bedenbaugh, 2007).

STUDIES WITH NONRANDOM COMPARISON GROUPS

Other studies have measured the differences between participants' assessments before and after the program and compared them with similar groups of people who did not participate. These findings can suggest likely outcomes of the program, but they are susceptible to bias, because there may be unmeasured differences between the groups. Individuals who volunteer for an arts program may differ from individuals who do not in important ways involving motivation and socialization.

Gene Cohen's Creativity and Aging Study, launched in 2001 with a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, sought to measure the effects of structured participatory arts programs on the physical and mental well-being of healthy older adults, as well as their social engagement. The study built on research suggesting that a sense of control—demonstrated by mastering artistic skills—and social engagement could contribute to health through their effect on the immune system (Cohen et al., 2006). In the study, participants in a chorale one year after the program began rated their overall health higher than the comparison group did, and reported fewer doctor visits, less over-the-counter medication use, fewer falls, and fewer other health problems. While these findings were promising, the study did not use random assignment. Study participants for the chorale and comparison groups were recruited with two separate notices, so those who volunteered to join the chorale may have differed from the comparison group in ways that affected the results.

A study involving 98 older adults in the UK investigated how learning to make music might contribute to subjective well-being of older adults. The study compared three groups of music learners with a group that participated in a learning program unrelated to the arts (examples of subjects were history and archiving); however, the participants were not randomly assigned to these groups (Perkins & Williamon, 2014). For the purpose of data analysis, the researchers classified participants as lower or higher socioeconomic status (SES) based on whether or not they received state benefits; the comparison group consisted of individuals with higher SES. After 10 weeks, the higher-SES participants in one-to-one instrumental music lessons, small-group instrumental lessons, or creative music work-

shops had significantly greater increases in physical activity and spiritual growth than the comparison group, though there was no significant difference between the groups' improvements in well-being, health-promoting behaviors, or interpersonal relations. Notably, in interviews with members of all three music groups, the social aspect was underscored, even if it was directly between learner and teacher; participants appreciated being able to help each other and meeting new people (Perkins & Williamon, 2014).

A French study that aimed to distinguish between the benefits of exercise and the benefits of creativity examined the effects of dance improvisation on attentional control. Sixteen people were assigned, by virtue of the district in which they lived, to a contemporary dance class that asked them to improvise their own steps and routines, rather than learning prescribed ones; 94 others were assigned to a different program incorporating movement, either falls prevention training or Tai Chi Chuan. When compared with random samples of 20 participants from the other programs after almost six months, the dancers improved on a test of switching attention, but none of the groups showed effects on setting or suppressing attention (Coubard, Duretz, Lefebvre, Lapalus, & Ferrufino, 2011).

PRIMARILY QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Arts, Health and Seniors (AHS) began as a demonstration of a community-engaged arts program in Vancouver that aimed to foster social inclusion. AHS offered weekly sessions at community centers over a three-year period. The programs included puppetry, dancing, writing, digital storytelling, and visual and textile arts. Research included a qualitative study of 20 participants at one community center, asking "How does involvement in the AHS program contribute to the senior participants' experience of community?" (Moody & Phinney, 2012), and a mixed-methods study of participants at four different centers (Phinney et al., 2014). The second study involved 24 older adults in the quantitative section, with no comparison group. The researchers took baseline measures in the first year of the program and follow-up measures two and a half years later on outcomes related to physical, emotional, and social well-being. The second study also included 38 focus group participants.

The quantitative study found improvements in perceived overall health and experience of chronic pain; in particular, concentrating on a project helped people forget about their pain temporarily (Phinney et al., 2014). In discussing the benefits they experienced, participants stressed the program structure and social opportunities. They said that the discipline of the program, along with the mutual commitment toward their shared project, helped them overcome emotional or physical barriers to getting out of the house. As one participant put it, group members gained "a greater sense of mental strength . . . a sense of responsibility that say, on a Tuesday, I have something to participate in" (Phinney et al., 2014, p. 340). They welcomed the artistic challenges and the opportunity to exercise their artistic sides and make a contribution (Phinney et al., 2014). They enjoyed making friends, appreciated the social support, and, in the 2012 study at one center, liked working with elementary school students as well as connecting with artists from other groups. Because the program involved group collaboration toward shared goals, "participants became a more cohesive group," according to the first study (Moody & Phinney, 2012, p. 62).



Photo by Jeremy Amar

In another qualitative study, examining psychosocial and mental well-being, researchers surveyed 138 students before and after a professionally taught course in visual arts in San Antonio. The courses lasted 12 weeks, and most classes began with an introduction to a new technique or skill, followed by self-directed work. There were opportunities for the artists to show their work at a senior center or in other locations, accompanied by one-paragraph essays on the role of art and creative engagement in their lives. Participants said that both the social interaction of the classes and their ability to be creative made them feel better. The cognitive challenge of the work, they said, increased their ability to focus, and the process made them feel calm, relaxed, and happy. One woman wrote, “Making art, it is like taking a vitamin for your entire body, is it very good” (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2018, p. 126).

SUGGESTIVE STUDIES

Other studies offer anecdotal evidence, indicating the perceptions of participants, but without a before-and-after comparison:

- An evaluation of a choir program in Minnesota, which aimed to improve participants’ quality of life, used focus groups to ask choir members about their experience with the program. Participants believed they had better stamina, energy, and lung capacity than before, and told of friendships created and positive family reactions (Nyquist & Nicholas, 2018).

- Interviews with contributors to an exhibition of works by older adults explored their thoughts about the relationship between creativity and successful aging. A majority of respondents spoke of coping strategies, and named positive interactions with others, personal growth, self-acceptance, and sense of purpose as important for successful aging. Benefits of creative activity included a sense of satisfaction and absorption in the work, a sense of purpose, and a connection to others (Fisher & Specht, 1999).
- The Music for Life Project studied the benefits of community music-making for older adults. In interviews and focus groups, researchers asked participants what made music-making special. Responses included opportunities for creativity and expression, as well as social affirmation, and some spoke of building or discovering a new identity (Creech, Hallam, McQueen, & Varvarigou, 2013).

SUMMARY OF WHAT WE KNOW AND WHAT WE DON'T

The research on creative aging is full of benefits reported, but the strength of the evidence, as laid out above, supports some benefits more than others. This section outlines the main conclusions and the level of support behind them. Following that, we suggest several areas where further research is needed.

WHAT WE KNOW

- **Creative aging programs contribute to social engagement.**

The inherent social component of creative aging programs is consistently cited as both a benefit and a source of other benefits in programs of all kinds (Johnson et al., 2020; Coulton et al., 2015). Qualitative research confirms that participants experience the social contact as meaningful for well-being (e.g., Phinney et al., 2014; Perkins & Williamon, 2014).

Social engagement appears to be a motivating factor for people to participate and remain active in the programs (e.g., Moody & Phinney, 2012). Retirement, health problems, and dwindling social circles can threaten older adults with isolation, and the friendships established through arts programs are important to them, they report in many studies (e.g., Moody & Phinney, 2012; Nyquist & Nicholas, 2018). A six-month choir program in San Francisco reduced loneliness and increased interest in life among members (Johnson et al., 2020). Arts programs can forge bonds; in a community arts program that included a public exhibition, participants said they derived meaning from having a shared purpose (Phinney et al., 2014). Such bonds can last beyond the program itself and arise in other community contexts (Nyquist & Nicholas, 2018)—as well as serving as motivation to join another course when the current one ends.

Plus, social benefits can extend into other relationships, spanning generations. The development of an artistic identity, with public exhibition of the work, can provide a new way for participants to interact with family, friends, and the community (Creech et al., 2013; Phinney et al., 2014). For example, at a concert by a choir in Minnesota, family members and friends said they saw participants in a new light—they saw the older adults' strengths, instead of seeing their health problems as primary

(Nyquist & Nicholas, 2018). Participants in arts programs were also sometimes eager to share their work as a new way to connect with family members, including grandchildren; the achievement can become exciting for everybody (Moody & Phinney, 2012; Perkins & Williamon, 2014).

WHAT WE HAVE SOME EVIDENCE ABOUT

- **Learning leads to neurological changes, and some studies—but not all—indicate that arts training improves cognitive function while students continue to practice.**

Cognitive function refers to abilities such as learning, memory, planning, and attention. Measurable cognitive benefits of various arts programs include improvements in perceptual speed, verbal fluency, memory, and problem solving, as well as a perceived increase in the ability to focus attention (Bugos et al., 2007; Kattenstroth et al., 2013; Noice et al., 2004; Noice & Noice, 2009, 2013). Not all studies have found significant effects, however. For example, one recent large, rigorous study of a weekly chorale program (Johnson et al., 2020) found no differences on tests of memory and executive function.

Research on cognitive benefits usually focuses on mastering skills rather than creative expression, and often examines individual instruction. While they are not true tests of programs that follow creative aging principles, studies that focus on neural plasticity—or the ability of the brain to adapt in response to experience—indicate one way that creative aging programs can benefit older adults. Brain imaging shows that the learning component of music or visual art training can lead to changes in older adults' brain function, potentially improving essential cognitive skills such as processing speed (Alain et al., 2019).

- **Different art forms can have specific effects on neural plasticity and cognitive outcomes.**

In the study on neural plasticity, Alain et al. (2019) found that music and visual arts training had different and specific effects on auditory and visual brain systems. And following earlier research on the effect of training on cognitive abilities, Helga Noice and Tony Noice designed their four-week theatrical program specifically to foster effects that would be transferable to other cognitive domains, taking advantage of the mental, physical, and emotional activity involved in performing a role (Noice & Noice 2013, p. 401); their results have largely borne out their aims.

This is not to say that any particular art form is “better” for older adults or sure to produce effects. Some people may be able to benefit more than others from a particular program, and individuals will not derive benefits from a program they choose not to attend. These studies are promising, however, in their attention to the mechanisms of improvement.

- **There is strong evidence that certain theater and choral programs can improve psychological health. Other arts programs have not been rigorously tested, but many participants attest to greater happiness and fulfillment.**

Arts programs have the potential to improve mental well-being, although few programs—with the exception of art therapy—have been rigorously evaluated for these effects. Theater group members

scored higher on psychological well-being than an arts appreciation group and a control group (Noice et al., 2004), and both theater and singing groups had higher scores on a personal growth scale than a control group (Noice & Noice, 2009). In another study, a community singing program in England resulted in improved mental health and reduced levels of depression and anxiety among choir members over the course of the program (Coulton et al., 2015).

Less rigorous evaluations also show encouraging trends in mood, concentration, and a sense of achievement, based on what participants actually say about how they feel (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2018; Perkins & Williamon, 2014; Phinney et al., 2014). There is no question that many participants experience enhanced well-being. Yet the existing research seldom tells us how their moods compare with those of people who did not have the opportunity to participate, or whether people who are happier in general are the ones who participate. Furthermore, attrition is common in any kind of class—no less so among older adults—and studies seldom collect responses from those who drop out; this is an area where further research is needed. The positive experiences older adults report are impressive and encouraging, but they cannot be considered generalizable to all older adults.

- **Potential benefits to physical health include improvements in posture and reaction times, increased stamina, fewer falls, and pain relief, but research is not consistent.**

The effect of arts on physical health may be both direct and indirect. Art that involves exercise, particularly dance, is expected to increase fitness as well as balance and coordination, which may help



Photo by Jeremy Amar

prevent falls and the ensuing effects on health; one six-month dance program produced gains in cognition, reaction times, hand-motor skills, and posture (Kattenstroth et al., 2013).

Other forms of art, such as theater, music, and painting or sculpture, also involve physical activity. Participatory arts programs designed for older adults often have a warm-up component, even if they do not involve sustained exercise, and any performance class requires a physical contribution. Participants in a chorale one year after the program began rated their overall health higher than the comparison group did and reported fewer doctor visits, less over-the-counter medication use, fewer falls, and fewer other health problems than a comparison group (Cohen et al., 2006). But in a more recent and rigorous study, a choir program did not result in significant improvements in lower body strength, balance, or gait speed as measured at the six-month point (Johnson et al., 2020).

Indirectly, the social component may contribute to the adoption of a healthier lifestyle. Participants in the aforementioned Arts, Health and Seniors (AHS) study in Vancouver said that the shared commitment among the participants helped them overcome emotional or physical barriers to getting out of the house (Phinney et al., 2014).

- **Creative aging programs can contribute to community engagement.**

Programs with a community focus can promote contact among diverse groups of people. The AHS program in Vancouver aimed “to contribute to creating strong, healthy communities that engage seniors as full and active members” (Moody & Phinney, 2012, p. 56). The program focused on populations considered at risk of isolation: an existing social group of Chinese-speaking women; a group of seniors who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender; a group of community center participants in a middle-class suburban neighborhood; and a social activity group from an ethnically diverse urban neighborhood. In the quantitative study, the participants did show a significant increase on a measure of sense of community, though not on measures specifically targeting community involvement and perceived social support (Phinney et al., 2014). The public presentations of their work made them feel they were contributing something to the larger community (Phinney et al., 2014). A subset of the AHS participants said in interviews that they appreciated their connections with the other groups and the chance to become part of a community of artists (Moody & Phinney, 2012).

- **Creative aging programs can reveal new possibilities and challenge stereotypes of old age.**

Older adults learning to sing, play a musical instrument, or draw seriously for the first time frequently expressed surprise and pleasure about something they had always wanted to do but never thought they could (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2018; Creech et al., 2013; Perkins & Williamon, 2014). Some arts program participants explained that the need to keep learning had motivated them to enroll (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2018). And as mentioned above, family members and friends attending a music program for older adults noticed participants’ strengths rather than their limitations (Nyquist & Nicholas, 2018).

- **A group setting may be particularly beneficial.**

The social component is an established benefit and appears to be a source of other benefits, such as motivation to continue and better mental health. Qualitative data consistently emphasize importance of the group in enjoyment and encouragement (Phinney et al., 2014; Perkins & Williamon, 2014). The combination of the group setting and artistic standards can be powerful: arts programs can create camaraderie and a sense of belonging, as well as a sense of artistic identity, pride, and contribution to the community (Creech et al., 2013). The collaborative effort inherent in community-based art programs appears to strengthen social bonds and interest in life (Moody & Phinney, 2012; Johnson et al., 2020).

A social benefit can be derived even from one-to-one lessons, however. The only study directly comparing a group program to a program of individual lessons found no difference between their outcomes (Perkins & Williamon, 2014). In another study, a program paired trained older adult volunteers with socially isolated rural older adults on art projects that gave participants an opportunity to create expressive art and include it in a public installation (MacLeod, Skinner, Wilkinson, & Reid, 2016). Most participants reported that their relationship with the volunteer, who visited their homes, helped them to create their works, and the volunteers also reported personal development that they expressed in art pieces.

- **The exercise of creativity, beyond simply learning and skill development, may be an important component of an effective program.**

Qualitative evidence is consistent with theories about how creating art benefits older individuals: exercising creativity requires problem-solving (Fisher & Specht, 1999) and can spark a sense of purpose and a renewed self-image (Phinney et al., 2014). Participants in a visual arts program in San Antonio specifically credited improved well-being to the cognitive challenge of making art (Cantu & Fleuriet, 2018). Creativity may promote cognitive flexibility, according to a study of contemporary dance improvisation in which dancers improved on a test of switching attention compared with those assigned to programs in falls prevention training or Tai Chi Chuan (Coubard et al., 2011). But we are aware of no other relevant studies directly comparing programs on the criterion of creativity.

- **Sequential instruction and skill building may offer a benefit that “arts and crafts” does not.**

The principles of creative aging suggest that learning to paint or sing carries an extra benefit, through mastery, that forms of creative play do not have. Mastering an art may lead to neurological changes and a sense of purpose. Based on the evidence of cognitive effects from learning and the gratification older adults experience at working beyond their expectations (Noice et al., 2004; Noice & Noice, 2009, 2013; Perkins & Williamon, 2014; Phinney et al., 2014), sequential instruction has particular value.

But the available research has not directly compared the effects of a program of sequential instruction with sessions of unstructured creative play. It is difficult to draw conclusions in the absence of

randomized studies, because those who choose to enroll in an arts program are assumed to be different from those who do not, not only on measurable characteristics such as physical health and mobility but also in typically unmeasured ways involving social involvement, motivation, and attitude.

- **A culminating event—a public exhibition—may be a valuable component.**

No studies have compared arts programs that do and do not including a culminating exhibition or performance. But a public exhibition is a key component of engagement with a wider community. Working toward a shared goal is also credited with building social cohesion and a sense of common purpose among participants (Moody & Phinney, 2012), and a culminating event allows family members and friends to see the older adult in a new light (Nyquist & Nicholas, 2018). It is also possible that the mild stress involved in a public performance or exhibition can be physically beneficial, by stimulating protective hormones (Patterson & Perlstein, 2011).

- **The context of a program makes a difference.**

The value of community-based creative aging programs also depends on what participants would be doing in the absence of the program. People who have fewer opportunities for arts engagement may benefit more from community-based programs than people who would find other ways to engage in art, for example by buying their own supplies or paying market rate for classes.

Yet in one study, musical instrument training seemed to lead to a greater increase in well-being for UK participants who did not receive government benefits (labeled “higher SES”) than for those who did receive government benefits (Perkins & Williamon, 2014). Only a few studies have targeted lower-income participants (Noice et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2020; Phinney et al., 2014).

QUESTIONS THAT NEED ANSWERS

- **How important is participation?**

Participatory arts plausibly strengthen self-image and social bonds for the numerous reasons discussed above. How these benefits compare with benefits from arts attendance is unknown; almost no studies directly compare participation with arts attendance. In the only study that did so, older adults who were studying acting techniques had, after four weeks, greater gains in word recall, problem-solving, and personal growth than a visual arts appreciation group or a control group (Noice et al., 2004). No studies were found that directly compared participation and appreciation for the same art form—for example, comparing watching a theater performance and taking a theater class.

It is certain that arts and cultural programs of all kinds—participatory or not—can have benefits. Just listening to music, for example, is associated with positive emotions in older adults (e.g., Laukka 2007).

- **How important is professional instruction?**

Professional instruction is one component of a well-crafted program, but it is possible that a program can be carried out by someone other than a professional teaching artist. In exploring the scalability



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of their theater intervention, Noice & Noice (2013) test the effectiveness of the program when conducted by a trained retirement home activity director or a minimally trained professional acting teacher, rather than the theater professor who created the program. The study found that it would be feasible to train multiple instructors to run the program and achieve comparable results.

There is also the question of whether an arts program with no instructor—for example, a participant-led writing group—can achieve the same effects as a professionally conducted writing program for older adults. The available research does not address this. (In fact, very little evidence is available for the effects of professionally conducted creative writing programs for older adults, outside of a therapeutic setting. This review found no strong studies of poetry or fiction writing programs.)

GAPS AND LIMITATIONS IN THE RESEARCH

Participatory arts programs clearly have the potential to benefit older adults in a variety of ways. To be useful, however, research needs a strong study design, and it needs to include underrepresented groups. In addition, it would be helpful to further explore which elements of arts programs are important and how best to direct resources.

STRONGER EVIDENCE IS NEEDED

- Much of the research concerns fairly small, exploratory programs; very few studies (Coulton et al., 2015; Noice et al., 2004; Noice & Noice 2009, 2013; Johnson et al., 2020) use a random assignment design with a large sample. More such studies would enable the comparison of a structured art class with arts and crafts activity time, for instance, and could examine how long a program needs to last. The nature of community-based art programs makes random assignment difficult, but using waiting lists can help make it fair to participants.
- Follow-up studies are needed to parse the inconsistency in quantitative findings.
- There is a lack of process evaluations, exploring the many possible reasons that programs are unable to achieve the expected results. The intervention may have been poorly implemented; it may have been too short; it may not have been tailored to the population. The measures that were used may have failed to capture real changes. Or it may be that the effects simply fade after a few months away from the program.

RESEARCH IS LACKING IN SEVERAL AREAS

- More research is needed on diverse groups, especially because different populations may respond differently.
 - Only a few studies have targeted lower-income participants (Noice et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2020; Phinney et al., 2014).
 - Few studies include substantial numbers of nonwhite participants.
 - The overwhelming majority of participants in nearly every study are women, and studies have not compared effects by gender.
- More research should explore what prevents people from taking part in the arts programs that are available: Is it stigma associated with senior centers, or something else? General surveys have found transportation and accessibility to be top barriers to attending cultural events (Rajan & Rajan, 2017), but programs in neighborhood senior centers and libraries are designed to be easier to get to than performance venues, which cluster in certain areas of the city (Stern & Seifert, 2017).
- There is a lack of research on the importance of creative expression in creative aging versus learning or social engagement. Many of the programs in the research cited above focus on mastering skills in the arts—especially singing, piano playing, and acting—but not creating original work.
- Research seldom follows participants over time—let alone participants and members of a comparison group. When positive effects are found, how long do they last after the conclusion of an intervention?
- The potential advantages of creative aging go beyond individual participants. Older adults' increased involvement in the arts stands to benefit libraries and cultural organizations, as a source of both funding and inspiration. Their arts involvement also stands to benefit senior-serving organizations, by leading to new community partnerships and inspiring appealing services. More broadly, an increase in community arts involvement can strengthen neighborhoods and civic life. Research on creative aging seldom looks at the effects on a wider community; this would be a promising direction for interdisciplinary study.

WHAT MAKES PROGRAMS WORK, AND IS THE COST WORTH IT?

- There is little empirical examination of program components and structure, with the exception of Noice et al. (2014). What do programs do to foster creativity, and which elements make the most difference? For example, Phinney et al. (2014) suggest that older adults benefit from several aspects of a program: (1) the project extending over time; (2) being challenged to learn something new; (3) being held accountable to serious aesthetic goals; (4) working together as a group; and (5) bringing the art into public space. These components generally align with the thinking of creative aging proponents since the Creativity & Aging Study (Cohen et al., 2006), but few programs emphasize all of them, and to our knowledge none have been tested as individual components within the context of older adults.
- Whether programs are scalable is seldom examined, let alone what resources would be required to spread a successful program across many sites. Noice & Noice (2013) is a rare study that does so.
- In-depth cost-benefit studies are almost nonexistent. The National Endowment for the Arts has called for more cost-benefit analysis (National Endowment for the Arts, 2013). Such analysis is particularly challenging because of the variety of potential outcomes and their interconnectedness. Cohen (2009) speculated on how such an analysis might look in terms of savings to Medicare, based on reduced use of medication and doctor visits found in the two-year findings from the Creativity and Aging Study (Cohen et al., 2007). Certainly, if creative aging programs were found to reduce spending on long-term services and supports, the benefits could outweigh the costs, but many benefits are less easy to quantify. Two studies have considered the cost effectiveness of community singing groups; they did not find that the programs resulted in lower health care costs, so determination of cost effectiveness would depend on the value attached to improvements in quality of life and mental health (Coulton et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2020).
- Studies that use comparison groups seldom survey how they are spending their time. Yet to weigh a program's cost effectiveness, it is important to consider the control condition: does a certain population have access to other activities that would offer similar benefits? In a community with limited resources, the benefits may loom larger (Johnson et al., 2020).

CONCLUSION

Creative aging programs offer clear social benefits and are likely to enhance well-being in a variety of ways. Learning can lead to changes in the brains of older adults; the effort a performance requires is often a source of stimulation; the commitment to a collaborative project can strengthen social bonds; finding unknown talents within themselves brightens participants' outlook on life; and even programs that do not involve a lot of exercise may yield better health outcomes for older adults. Yet how these programs work—and how to *make* them work—is still in need of study. In addition, future research should look at the broader effects, especially among older adults who do not have equal opportunities to benefit from creative aging programs. The difference these programs can make in communities that are less likely to have them is largely unknown.

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