Research and Evaluation Quality Assurance Process
LA County Department of Arts and Culture
Revised June 27, 2019

Purpose
The purpose of the LA County Department of Arts and Culture (Arts Department) Research and Evaluation (R&E) Quality Assurance (QA) process is to ensure that documents related to research and evaluation created by staff, contractors and consultants are of the highest quality and adhere to the highest principles in the field.

This document begins by providing an overview of the Arts Department’s QA review policies, then describes the guiding principles that underlie the QA process. This is followed by a principles for protecting human subjects. The final section lists the quality standards associated with each of the four key types of research and evaluation documents subject to this policy.

QA Review Policies
There are four types of documents that must be reviewed by the Arts Department’s Director of Research and Evaluation prior to being finalized, whether they are created by Arts Department staff or contractors:

- **Research Plans or Proposals**, including evaluation sections in grant applications
- **Literature Reviews**, either as standalone documents or part of larger projects
- **Data Collection Protocols**, including survey questionnaires, focus group or interview protocols, and observation guides
- **Research or Evaluation Reports**, including data visualizations

These documents will be reviewed against a set of quality standards and the reviewer(s) will provide an overall recommendation as to whether the document should be

- Accepted without changes,
- Accepted with minor changes, or
- Returned to the author for major revisions.

The reviewer(s) will provide notes, comments, and other feedback to help improve the document. A second staff reviewer may review the document as well, at the joint discretion of the Director of Research and Evaluation and the project manager. This process may be used to review other types of documents beyond the four listed here.

Documents created by contractors should be reviewed by the project manager prior to being reviewed by the Director of Research and Evaluation, to ensure they are largely free of grammatical, typographical or factual errors. Documents created by staff may be sent to the Director of Research and Evaluation directly for review. Documents created by the Director of Research and Evaluation may be reviewed by one or more members of the Internal R&E Advisory Team.
The Director of Research and Evaluation should be given at least ten business days to review any document through the QA process. The QA review process does not replace or obviate the need for review by division directors and/or the Department Director.

**Guiding Principles**

These are the guiding principles that underlie the Arts Department R&E QA process.

*Systematic Inquiry*

The work adheres to the highest technical and methodological standards. All documents are forthright about the strengths and limitations of the project. The work does not assert findings that are beyond the scope of the evidence gathered. Both the process and results are explained accurately and in sufficient detail to allow others to understand, interpret and critique the work.

*Integrity and Honesty*

The work does not misrepresent – either by omission or commission – the process or final results of the project. Findings do not overstate positive results nor understate negative results. All individuals conducting the work have disclosed to the Arts Department any potential conflicts of interest prior to engaging in the project. All sources of information and ideas are appropriately credited.

*Respect for People*

Both the process and work products respect the rights, security, dignity and self-worth of respondents, program participants, clients and other stakeholders. All professional ethics, standards, and regulations regarding risks, harms, and burdens are adhered to, including but not limited to confidentiality and informed consent. Where negative results have been found, these are reported honestly, in a manner that respects the dignity and self-worth of project stakeholders.

*Utilization and Maximization of Benefits*

The goals of the study are clearly articulated, and their relevance to the needs and interests of the Arts Department are explained. Timeliness of feedback that will contribute to organizational learning is prioritized in research design and implementation. Impact and relevance to the broader public interest are clear. The benefits of the study outweigh the cost or burden on those participating in it. Unintended consequences are considered and ameliorated to the degree possible.

*Collaboration*

Where possible, research and evaluation are conducted in collaboration with stakeholders in the Arts Department’s work, in particular with those who will benefit from it most. Depending on the project this may include artists, arts organizations, educational institutions, departments of County government and/or residents of LA County. Project stakeholders are informed of findings that may affect them in a timely manner and through appropriate channels.

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Protection of Human Subjects
While the Arts Department does not conduct a significant volume of research or evaluation projects that involve human subjects, we make it a practice to conform to the highest standards in the field whenever we do so. The protection of human subjects is centered on respect for persons, minimizing any risk of harm, maximizing any possible benefits, and ensuring that all study participants are treated with justice.

Obtaining informed consent for participation in a research or evaluation study is a key practice for ensuring the protection of human subjects. When obtaining consent, the individual participant must be fully informed of the risks and benefits associated with participation in the study, and must not be coerced to participate in any way. The individual formally grants his or her consent by signing a document laying out what she or he has been informed of and has agreed to. When they are needed, informed consent documents will be jointly developed by the project manager and the Director of Research and Evaluation.

In the case of research or evaluation studies where data is collected about individual persons, especially vulnerable populations, it may be appropriate for an Institutional Review Board (IRB) to review the processes by which human subjects are selected, the research methods that will be used, and the way informed consent will be secured, prior to launching the study. The Director of Research and Evaluation will determine whether review by an IRB is required.

Quality Standards

Research Plan or Proposal Standards
Every research or evaluation project at the Arts Department begins with a research plan or proposal and includes specific research questions. This plan must be reviewed through the QA process.

1. The research questions are clearly written and their relevance to the needs of the Arts Department is clearly articulated.
2. The data collection and outreach plans are likely to produce data that will answer the research questions.
3. The rights of human subjects are protected throughout the process of data collection and reporting of findings.
4. The number of expected respondents is clearly stated, and is appropriate to the budget, timeline, project goals, and research questions.
5. Methods for analyzing the data and reporting findings are described clearly, and are appropriate to the methods of data collection. Persons responsible for the data analysis and reporting are identified.
6. The costs and timeline are appropriate to the project and the needs of the Arts Department.
7. Where possible and relevant, key stakeholders are involved in project design, data collection, data analysis and/or data reporting.

Literature Review Standards
A literature review is a summary and synthesis of what scholars and experts have written about a particular topic. The Arts Department utilizes literature reviews to inform ourselves about current thinking on a topic, as well as the history of how that thinking has evolved.
1. The topic of the literature review is clear and concise, and its relevance to the Arts Department’s interests is clearly articulated.

2. The sources cited (articles, reports, books, etc.) have been synthesized in the writing, rather than being summarized consecutively.

3. Sources cited include both peer-reviewed academic journals as well as foundation- and practitioner-produced publications. Where non-academic sources are cited, these are in-depth studies published by leading organizations or thought pieces by leaders in the field. Blogs and newspaper articles and are cited only sparingly, if at all.

4. The original source is always cited. If a statistic is quoted in a source, the author has researched it back to its original source to confirm its validity and reliability. If an article in the literature review cites another article, the original article is cited in the literature review.

5. The literature is properly sourced and cited. The source of all text, ideas and/or findings is clear. Direct quotes are properly cited and punctuated as such.

6. The writing is clear and concise, and understandable to an audience of generalists. Jargon is used only sparingly, and is clearly defined when used.

**Data Collection Instruments Standards**

The Arts Department engages in various types of primary data collection. Instruments utilized for data collection may include but are not limited to surveys, interview protocols, focus group protocols, observation guides, and pre/post tests.

1. A research plan has been reviewed and approved prior to (or combined with) approval of the data collection instrument(s).

2. The purpose for collection of the data has been articulated clearly and is relevant to the needs of the Arts Department.

3. The type of data collection instrument selected is the best choice available for collecting the data required.

4. A data collection plan is included that provides protocols for how the instrument will be utilized and who the expected respondents are.

5. The number of expected respondents is clearly stated, and is appropriate to the budget, timeline, project goals and research questions.

6. Questions in the instrument are written such that the expected respondents can understand and respond to them.

7. If appropriate, the instrument has been translated into other languages.

8. There are no double-barreled questions\(^2\) or leading questions. Questions are designed to elicit information from the respondent, not to influence the respondent’s opinion.

9. The rights of human subjects are protected in the instrument and its associated data collection plan and protocols.

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\(^2\) A double-barreled question is one that asks about two topics, issues or constructs but only allows for one answer.
Research and Evaluation Report Standards

Research and evaluation reports summarize the findings from the study and provide adequate information about the study’s methods so that other readers can evaluate the study’s soundness.

1. The research questions are articulated clearly.
2. Findings in the report answer the research questions. Where the questions were not answered by the study, a clear explanation of why they were not is provided.
3. Methods utilized in the study are described with enough detail that an external reader can judge their soundness.
4. The report begins with an executive summary that provides a high level summary of key findings.
5. Limitations to the study are described clearly.
6. All sources of data, analysis, text, and ideas are fully credited.
7. Staff and consultants who participated in preparing the study are properly credited, as are any funders that provided support and organizations that provided data.
8. If the report includes a literature review, it follows the Arts Department’s QA guidelines for literature reviews.
9. The report is responsive and relevant to the needs of the Arts Department.
10. Writing in the report is clear and understandable to a general audience. Jargon is used only sparingly, and is clearly defined when used.
11. Charts, graphs and other data visualizations used to present data are clearly designed and understandable to a general audience.
12. The author has not drawn conclusions beyond the evidence or inserted opinions. If recommendations are provided, these do not go beyond the evidence provided by the data.