

Doors Open Culture + Communities Study Findings Brief



Credit: Bellevue Lunar New Year Event, 2026. Funded by an Open 4Culture Grant. Photo by Timothy Aguero Photography.

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4Culture

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This publication, as well as associated resources from the study, are available as downloadable PDFs at <https://www.4culture.org/culture-and-communities-study/>.

Special thanks to the **Culture & Community Survey Advisory Committee**, for their invaluable guidance, insight, and expertise throughout this work:

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We are deeply grateful to our **community partners** who shared the survey with their communities:

Centro Cultural Mexicano

Cham Refugees Community

Deaf Spotlight

Friends of the Issaquah Salmon Hatchery

KidsQuest Children's Museum

Oxbow Farm & Conservation Center

Pacific Bonsai Museum

Pacific Northwest Ballet

Pacific Science Center

Refugee Artisan Initiative

ShoreLake Arts

Wing Luke Museum of the Asian Pacific American Experience

Woodland Park Zoo

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Credit: Freeway Park in Bloom Festival, Freeway Park Association, 2025. Seneca Plaza, Seattle. Photo by Timothy Aguero Photography.





Doors Open Culture & Community Study

Supporting culture is who we are. That's the key takeaway of the 2026 Doors Open Culture & Communities Study. King County residents not only participate in culture, they believe in it as a value. 97% say cultural organizations make their communities better by bringing people together, honoring cultural diversity, providing educational opportunities and contributing to economic vitality. Nearly universally, residents agree that having a rich cultural sector, including arts, heritage, historic preservation and science, improves the quality of life in King County.

It's validating to learn that King County residents participate in cultural activities at greater rates than national comparables – we are 1.3x more likely to visit a museum and 1.3x more likely to attend a live performance than the national average. More than half of residents (58%) participated in at least three cultural activities last year. And really, this should be no surprise. After funding more than 1,000 cultural organizations across King County in the disciplines of Arts, Heritage, Historic Preservation and Science & Technology in 2025 alone, it's clear that King County residents love their cultural organizations!

95% of King County residents have experienced health and wellbeing outcomes from participating in cultural activities, with top responses being social (enjoyment in spending time with family and friends; feeling more connected) and emotional (a sense of joy, beauty, and/or wonder; intellectual stimulation). These findings make supporting communities across King County through the Doors Open investment even more resonant.

But barriers still exist. Cost is a real concern, especially for those under 40 or those with young children. Creating welcoming and accessible spaces for those who are managing social, emotional or physical disabilities is another theme: three out of five households named an accessibility need when it comes to attending cultural activities. These economic and access pressures make programs that support free and reduced cost admissions even more important, along with general operating support and facility grants that allow cultural organizations to take strides towards addressing broad accessibility needs. Doors Open has also welcomed in a whole new cohort of cultural programming across the Science + Technology discipline, opening doors to STEM experiences across the county. Addressing these underlying community needs, while continuing to grow our partnerships with new organizations across all supported disciplines is fundamental to ensuring the maintenance and growth of audiences across the County.

Culture matters to King County residents in a big way – and building on our shared value of culture can bring us together. At the same time, both cultural participants and cultural producers face challenges related to economic realities. As we consider the next several years of Doors Open programming, we look forward to considering more ways to address those barriers and deepen the engagement of our community. And to celebrate the ways in which culture unites us as a community.

We look forward to seeing you out there, engaging in our rich cultural landscape!



Brian J. Carter, Executive Director



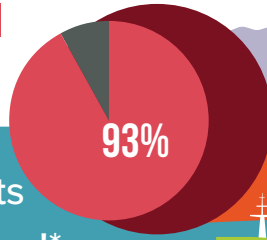
Catherine Nueva España, Board Chair

DOORS OPEN CULTURE & COMMUNITIES STUDY

WINTER 2026

King County is a vibrant community of cultural participants.

93% of King County residents participate in cultural activities!*



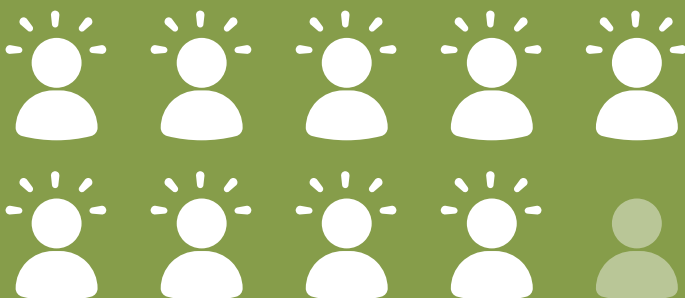
CULTURE IMPROVES LIVES

King County residents engage in culture to:

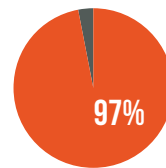


- Connect with family and friends
- Feel a sense of belonging
- Expand their minds
- Relax and enjoy themselves

Over **9 out of 10** King County residents think cultural activities have positively affected their health and wellbeing while also providing other outcomes such as gaining knowledge, empathy, curiosity, critical thinking, and more.



CULTURE IS COMMUNITY



97% of King County residents believe cultural organizations positively impact their community, with the top impacts being:



Providing educational opportunities



Improving quality of life

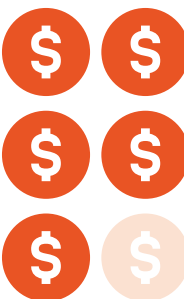


Honoring cultural diversity



Promoting engagement in community life

And **5 out of 6** King County residents think cultural organizations contribute to the economic vitality of their community as well!



SOURCE: King County Resident Culture & Communities Survey, fielded 2026 by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of 4Culture.

*Information on how cultural participation is defined is included in the full report.

DOORS OPEN CULTURE & COMMUNITIES STUDY

BUT BARRIERS STILL EXIST

Despite these positive findings, many King County residents are not able to participate in culture as frequently as they would like.

Primary barriers to higher participation include:



Cost



Time



Other interests/priorities

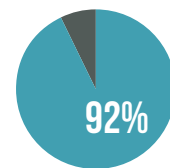
Cost barriers are greatest for young adults under 40 without children, families with young children, and lower-income households.



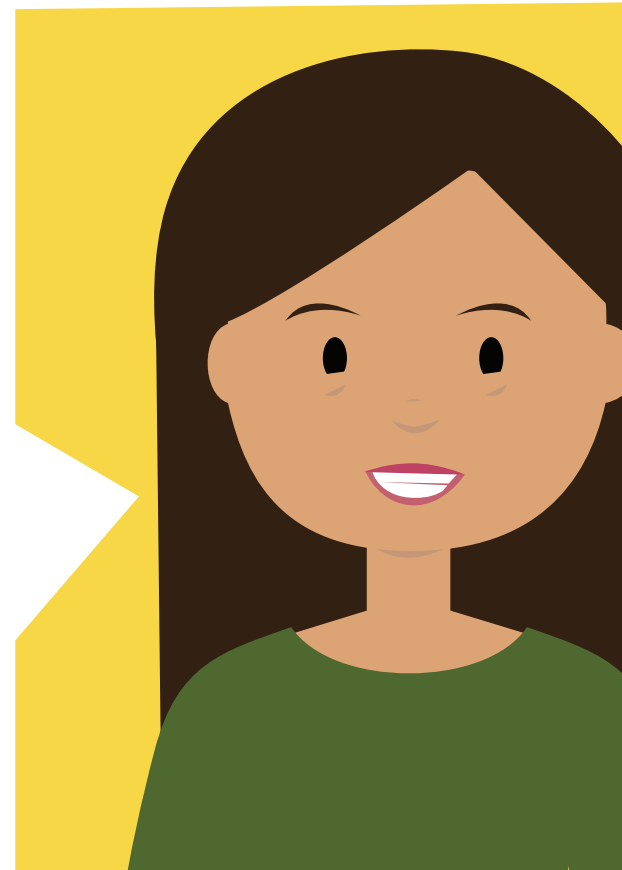
3 out of 5 King County households also have access and support needs.

“These organizations are not ‘extras’ — they are connective tissue. They create spaces where people encounter cultures beyond their own, build empathy, and feel a sense of belonging. Without them, King County would feel more siloed, less curious, and less humane.” – King County resident

King County residents are cultural participants, and they want their cultural organizations to be able to serve their communities.



92% of King County residents agree that the King County Council should work to support our county's cultural organizations.



SOURCE: King County Resident Culture & Communities Survey, fielded 2026 by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of 4Culture.

*Information on how cultural participation is defined is included in the full report.

Exploring Cultural Participation in King County

DOORS OPEN

In 2023, King County passed the Doors Open legislation, creating dedicated funding to expand access to cultural opportunities for county residents. In winter 2026, 4Culture initiated this Culture & Communities Study to better understand how King County residents participate in and value culture in their communities.

The findings provide a foundation for more informed decision-making across King County's cultural sector in three key areas:

UNDERSTAND PARTICIPATION PATTERNS

Examine how, why, and how often King County residents from different backgrounds and life stages participate in cultural life, beyond attendance at individual cultural venues and events.

SUPPORT SMARTER DECISIONS

Help cultural organizations make the most of limited resources by informing audience development, programming, outreach, and investment decisions.

UNDERSTAND RESIDENT EXPERIENCE

Better understand residents' motivations and expectations to create cultural experiences that feel relevant and welcoming to new and existing audiences.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study was designed to meet specific research outcomes, including:

MEASURING CULTURAL PARTICIPATION:

- Tracking participation rates across different types of cultural activities (e.g., visiting art museums or attending concerts)
- Identifying participation segments to better understand patterns of cultural participation, particularly among lower-frequency participants

ASSESSING MOTIVATIONS AND BARRIERS:

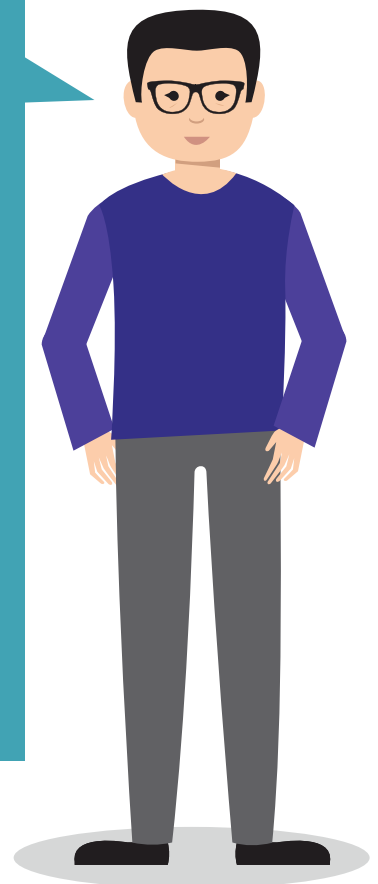
- Contextualizing cultural participation as part of larger leisure-time choices
- Identifying factors that limit participation and access
- Understanding values and attitudes toward cultural content and experiences

UNDERSTANDING PARTICIPATION OUTCOMES:

- Individual outcomes: health, well-being, education, and emotional outcomes
- Social outcomes: volunteering, community engagement, social connection, and shared experiences
- Community outcomes: quality of life, civic engagement, historic preservation, and sense of place

Taken together, the results of this study provide resources that can be deployed by funders, stakeholders, practitioners, and the public to support the cultural sector more effectively.

"Cultural organizations are essential to the character of King County. The excellent quality of life in this community would not exist without our cultural organizations. My life is constantly enriched by our public spaces and institutions."



About This Study

SCOPE

For the purposes of this study, culture and cultural participation are defined by the activities funded by 4Culture. These activity categories establish the scope of the research and provide the basis for measuring cultural participation.

THEY INCLUDE:

- Museums of all types, including botanic gardens and arboretums, science centers, zoos and aquariums, and historic sites
- Live performances and events, including theater, dance, improv, performance art, concerts, film, festivals, and lectures
- History and heritage activities, including visits to historic sites, historic preservation, heritage festivals, and similar programs
- Literary arts events, such as author talks, lectures, poetry readings, and creative writing workshops
- STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) activities at museums and other cultural and educational settings
- Cultural traditions and community practices, including Indigenous, Native, and other traditional cultural activities

THIS STUDY IS INTENDED TO:

Measure cultural participation in King County

Understand the motivations and barriers that influence participation

Assess residents' perceptions of culture and its impact

THIS STUDY DOES NOT:

- **Evaluate individual cultural organizations or disciplines**
The study does not assess the performance of individual organizations or cultural disciplines.
- **Rank organizations or disciplines**
Organizations and disciplines are not compared or ranked.
- **Serve as an advocacy document**
The study provides a baseline for measuring the impact of the Doors Open program rather than advocating for specific policies or funding priorities.
- **Estimate economic impact**
Economic impact studies require different methodologies and are beyond the scope of this research.

METHODOLOGY

This study collected data through surveys, distributed to two separate sample groups, that examined cultural participation in King County. Questions explored participation in cultural activities, as well as residents' values, attitudes, and perceptions on culture and its impact.

King County residents

A demographically representative sample of King County residents was purchased through an online survey platform to provide countywide benchmark data.

Cultural audiences

Individuals were recruited through the communications lists of cultural organizations across King County to provide additional insight into frequent participants and cultural supporters.

KING COUNTY RESIDENTS

N = 963

95% confidence with a margin of error of +/- 3.2%

100% King County residents

Sourced from Alchemer Panel Services

Note: Minor supplementation from the Cultural Audiences sample was implemented to address statistically meaningful gaps in representation. See Demographic Representation on page 9 for additional details.

KING COUNTY CULTURAL AUDIENCES

N = 1,787

85% King County residents

Sourced from communications lists of nine cultural organizations and 4Culture

DEMOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION

The King County Resident sample was designed to reflect the county's demographic composition. Where meaningful differences from U.S. Census benchmarks were identified, supplemental analyses or adjustments were made to assess or improve representation. Where it fell short, minor supplementation from the Cultural Audiences sample was able to address the gaps as follows:

GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION

Fewer than 1% of respondents indicated they live in unincorporated King County, less than the 10% recorded in the U.S. Census. To improve representation, 50 respondents from the Cultural Audiences sample who lived in unincorporated areas were added to the Resident sample, for a total of 6%. This adjustment did not produce a statistically significant change in the overall findings.

RACE AND ETHNICITY

The King County Resident sample fell one percentage point short of the target for respondents identifying as Asian, East Asian, South Asian, or Southeast Asian. To improve representation, 26 respondents from the Cultural Audiences sample were added to the Resident sample. This adjustment did not meaningfully affect the overall results.

GENDER

Men were underrepresented in the King County Resident sample (42% of respondents compared with 51% of King County residents), while women were correspondingly overrepresented. Because respondents identifying as men or women comprised 96% of the sample, test weighting was conducted to assess whether this imbalance affected the overall findings. Differences in the overall results were less than one percentage point, so no weighting was deemed necessary.

This report presents findings from the King County Resident sample, in order to provide an overview of King County residents. The complete graphic report, available on the 4Culture website, includes results from all survey questions and the Cultural Audiences sample.



Credit: Oxbow Farm and Conservation Center, 2025. Carnation, WA. Photo by 4Culture Staff.

Cultural Participation in King County

King County is a culturally active community.

When all cultural activities are measured, 93% of King county residents have recently participated in at least one cultural activity.

At first glance, this appears to be an extremely high level of engagement in culture from the public. Yet it masks a more complicated story.

Instead, a more accurate interpretation is that it indicates a high level of baseline participation and perhaps *interest* and *goodwill* towards the cultural sector. It does not indicate depth of engagement.

CULTURAL PARTICIPATION FREQUENCY

To better understand the depth of cultural participation, respondents were assigned a participation score based on the frequency and breadth of their participation across the cultural activities included in this study:

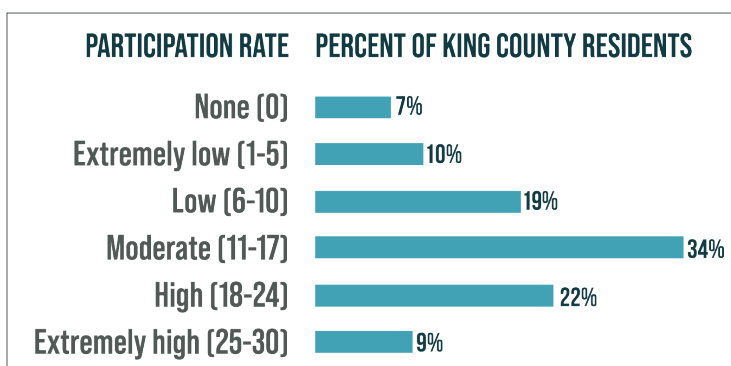
Scores ranged
from 0 to 30

A maximum 10 points each
was awarded based on
reported visitation frequency
at both museums and live
performances

10 points were allocated
based on the breadth of
participation in the other six
cultural activities tracked

Just under 10% of King County residents have extremely high participation rates, and just over 30% fall in the high/extremely high categories. Parents and guardians of minor children are more likely to fall into this category.

The largest segment, those with moderate participation rates, make up about one third of King County residents. Young adults with no minor children are more likely to fall into this category.



About a third of King County residents have lower-than-average rates of cultural participation, including 7% that reported no cultural participation at all. These individuals with lower-than-average cultural participation also engage less frequently

with non-cultural leisure-time activities, and experience greater external constraints, including financial, on their leisure time. They are also more likely to be older adults over the age of 60.

Overall, however, there are no significant differences in participation rates by accessibility needs or by race or ethnicity.

CULTURAL ACTIVITIES

For this study, the following were included as cultural activities, and those who had engaged in at least one in the past year were considered a cultural participant:

- Museums of all types, including botanic gardens and arboretums, science centers, zoos and aquariums, and historic sites
- Live performances and events, including dance, festivals, film and cinema, concerts, lectures and speakers, theater, and improv and performance art
- History and heritage activities, including family history, historic preservation activities, and watching historical documentaries
- Literary arts events, such as author talks, lectures, poetry readings, and creative writing workshops
- STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) activities at museums and other educational settings
- Cultural festivals
- Customs and practices of a specific cultural community
- Indigenous, Native, and traditional cultural activities

Cultural Participation and Individual Impact

HEALTH, WELL-BEING, EDUCATION, AND EMOTIONAL OUTCOMES

King County residents report a wide range of positive individual outcomes from cultural participation. These findings are based on residents' self-reported perceptions of the impact of cultural participation.

95% report positive health and well-being outcomes

93% report positive educational and emotional outcomes, including increased knowledge, curiosity, empathy, and critical thinking

Residents associated cultural participation with a wide range of health and well-being benefits. About half cited spending time with family and friends, while a similar proportion identified feelings of joy, beauty, and wonder.

Many others also chose responses that reinforced the support of mental health, social connection, and cultural identity found in cultural participation.



What kinds of health and well-being outcomes do you think participating in cultural activities provides your life?
(Choose all that apply.)



"Joy, inspiration, love
and energy, especially
in hard times."

"Community connection, friendship
building, and health of all sorts.
Makes me actually feel alive."

COGNITIVE AND OTHER PERSONAL IMPACTS

While 93% of King County residents agreed that cultural participation provides cognitive and other personal impacts, no single educational or emotional outcome exceeded 50% of respondents. Rather than clustering around one or two dominant benefits, responses were distributed across a wide range of outcomes, including learning, empathy, curiosity, and community connection.

COGNITIVE AND OTHER PERSONAL IMPACTS

 What kind of impact do you think cultural organizations have had in your life? (Choose those that are most important to you.)



Credit: Low Tide Celebration, 2025. Point Robinson Park, Vashon, WA. Photo by Timothy Aguero Photography.

Community Impacts of Culture

Nearly all King County residents (97%) identify at least one positive impact that cultural organizations have on their community.

The most frequently cited community benefits include:

COMMUNITY IMPACT



What are the most important ways cultural organizations contribute to your community? (Choose all that apply.)



Educational opportunities emerged as the most frequently identified community benefit overall. When educational opportunities for both adults and young people are combined, **66% of residents identified education as an important community impact.**

Residents also recognize culture's economic role. Over **five out of six** King County residents believe cultural organizations contribute to local economic vitality through jobs, spending, and tax revenue.¹

"strengthened connections with my neighbors"

"[developed] more connection to the cultures of my community"

Together, these findings suggest a broad consensus that cultural organizations are not simply entertainment providers. They are part of the social, educational, and economic fabric of community life.

97% of residents identify at least one positive community impact

¹For comparison, 70% of U.S. adults nationally agree arts & culture contribute to local economic vitality.

Barriers to Participation and Equity Considerations

Although most King County residents participate in cultural activities, practical barriers continue to limit how often they are able to do so.

Cost is the most commonly cited barrier. Other barriers are shaped by a person's lifestyle and circumstances, including time pressures, busy households, work or family responsibilities, and social environment. Many of these barriers are difficult for cultural organizations to address directly.

TOP 5 BARRIERS TO CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT*



"Offer financial aid for families. Tickets have gotten too expensive."

Most reported barriers are practical rather than attitudinal, suggesting that participation is often limited by logistics rather than lack of interest.

Residents identified lower costs, fewer crowds, and better marketing as the most effective ways to encourage greater cultural participation.

REDUCING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION*



Distance and parking were not included as response options because they are generally beyond the control of cultural organizations.

COSTS

Affordability is a significant factor in cultural participation. Understanding how residents balance cultural activities against other household expenses provides important context for participation decisions. King County residents with lower levels of cultural participation also tend to have lower household incomes and lower educational attainment, suggesting they have less discretionary income available for cultural activities.

Costs are also a more significant concern for young adults without children and families with young children. While thus far these population segments have been participating in cultural activities at moderate to high rates, national research in the museum sector is showing significant weakness with family audiences as they feel ongoing financial pressures.²

ACCESSIBILITY

The majority of King County households reported at least one access or support need, but these needs did not appear to affect cultural participation rates.²

Individual respondents in the Cultural Audiences survey described accessibility challenges at specific cultural venues. While these experiences did not affect participation patterns overall, they highlight accessibility issues remain important at the organizational level.

OTHER EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS

No statistically significant differences in cultural participation were observed across other demographic groups at the county level. These findings describe participation across King County as a whole and should not be interpreted as evidence that every cultural organization is reaching its intended audiences equally.

Resident Expectations of Cultural Organizations

King County residents expect cultural organizations to create welcoming, inclusive experiences. They value environments where all community members feel represented and welcome.

TOP 3 RESPONSIBILITIES OF CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS TO VISITORS*



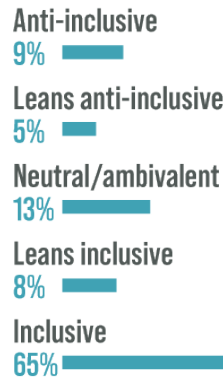
"This world, county and our community are multi-cultural. If we ignore this, we ignore humanity!"

"Culture is central to the human experience. This is a critical asset."

Individual values shape expectations of cultural content and influence how residents respond to different types of programming and content. Despite broader national debates over culture, history, and science, King County residents broadly agree that inclusive content and freedom of artistic expression are important.

NEARLY THREE-QUARTERS OF KING COUNTY RESIDENTS SUPPORT INCLUSIVE CONTENT

Nearly three-quarters (73%) of King County residents support inclusive content in cultural organizations, including stories and perspectives of women, people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ people, and religious minorities. Only 14% are not supportive.



KING COUNTY RESIDENTS BROADLY SUPPORT CULTURAL FREE SPEECH

Seventy percent of King County residents support freedom of expression in cultural programming and oppose efforts to remove content that addresses topics such as gender, race, ethnicity, and other contested or politicized science or history content. Only 12% support removing content on these topics.*

92% of residents agree King County Council should work to support the county's cultural organizations

Discussion and Implications

The findings from this baseline research are encouraging. Culture is highly valued in King County and participation is widespread.

King County is a community of cultural participants.

Building on that foundation will be especially important as the Doors Open program seeks to expand access to cultural opportunities throughout the county. The findings point to several opportunities to deepen cultural participation and strengthen its benefits for individuals and communities.

INCREASE FREQUENCY OF PARTICIPATION

While 93% of King County residents participate in cultural activities, participation frequency varies widely. Many residents participate infrequently.

Reframing access gaps as *frequency gaps* instead of *participation gaps* is important. Language and labels that refer to individuals as non-participants is not only inaccurate, but risks reinforcing assumptions about access, opportunity, interest, and who belongs in cultural spaces.

Low-frequency participants may wish they could engage more often. By treating them as active participants and building on ways they already engage with culture, their identity as cultural participants is reinforced and more frequent participation is encouraged.

Because older adults participate less frequently than other age groups, they represent an important opportunity for increased engagement. Expanding programs focused on engaging older adults could support healthy aging while strengthening community connections.

REDUCE BARRIERS

Cost is the most significant barrier that cultural organizations can influence. Increasing affordability may encourage more frequent participation among young adults without children, families with young children, and lower-income households.

Expanding access also requires sustainable funding. Cultural organizations must compensate staff fairly while covering the costs of delivering high-quality programs. Supporting organizational costs makes lower ticket prices and other access initiatives possible.

FOSTER CULTURAL PARTICIPATION THROUGH BELONGING

While cultural participation is high and support for culture in King County is widespread, many residents may not see themselves as part of the county's cultural community. Individuals who participate in culture more frequently realize more benefits, including more cognitive, social, civic, mental, and emotional outcomes.³

Recognizing and celebrating the many ways residents already participate in cultural life may encourage more frequent engagement while strengthening the individual and community benefits associated with cultural participation.

"[Without cultural organizations] people would have fewer methods or locations to learn cultural and scientific lessons or experience the arts, and we would be less likely to produce new generations of scientists and artists."

"As a transplant here, the diversity is what makes this place special. From the Native Americans, to the Norwegians, to the Asian population, the diverse cultures is how this place produced grunge, and all this amazing tech. It's a melting pot of collaboration and creation."

APPLYING THE FINDINGS

FOR FUNDERS AND POLICYMAKERS:

This research establishes a baseline for measuring the long-term effects of investments intended to increase participation frequency and reduce barriers to cultural participation.

Because King County's population is large, even substantial investments may produce only gradual countywide change. Future research should track changes in participation frequency and public perceptions as measures of success. The outcomes of investments in individual cultural organizations are equally important to evaluate.

FOR CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS:

The full graphic report includes additional findings and practical resources to help cultural organizations strengthen engagement with existing audiences while reaching new ones. It also includes infographics examining residents by life stage, cultural participation frequency, and the types of cultural organizations they visit.

FOR 4CULTURE:

Through Doors Open, 4Culture will continue investing in arts, heritage, science, and preservation organizations across King County, expanding access to cultural experiences and supporting the public benefits these organizations provide. The current Doors Open implementation plan guides funding through 2031, when the cultural access sales tax is scheduled to expire; any future extension or renewal would require action by the King County Council.

Additional Resources and Works Cited

THE FULL GRAPHIC REPORT CAN BE FOUND AT:

(As well as the full suite of study resources)

www.4culture.org/culture-and-communities-study/

WORKS CITED

1. Americans Speak Out About the Arts in 2023 (Americans for the Arts).
2. 2026 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers and Broader Population Sampling (American Alliance of Museums and Wilkening Consulting).
3. Doors Open Culture + Communities Study, Full Graphic Report (4Culture + Wilkening Consulting), 2026.

Credit: Pioneer Square Festival, 2025. Seattle, WA. Photo by Doug Cueva.

