

What does the arts-service organization sector look like in Canada today?

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IN COLLABORATION WITH MASS CULTURE

A Research Snapshot

Funded by a SSHRC Partnership Engage grant, the “Mapping Canadian Arts-Service Organizations as Cultural Research Conduits” research project was led by Dr. Miranda Campbell at Ryerson University in collaboration with Mass Culture.

Map designed and built by
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What are ASOs and Why Map Them?

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Arts-service organizations (ASOs) are member-directed representative professional bodies, meant to serve the interests of their members as well as their artistic discipline and the public. With this dual role, of both serving artists and the public, ASOs play an important bridging or intermediary role in supporting the arts in Canada. [The Boston Foundation](#) calls ASOs “the unacknowledged gems of the cultural ecosystem” (2005). ASOs exist at the national, provincial, local, and grassroots levels in Canada, but we lack a clear and current picture of the size, scope, role, and features of ASOs. Given their sometimes lack of visibility within a larger creative industries framework, how do ASOs generate their own research to document their existence and role, and to develop strategies to best serve their members?

In this research project, we set out to literally put ASOs on the map, by creating a digital map to document their existence, so that the ASO sector can begin to better know itself and take stock of its strengths and capacities. We hope this mapping research can act as a useful tool to develop a framework for collective stewardship and resource sharing and help identify where further collaboration could happen across organizations, to continue on in this vital work of supporting the arts and artists in Canada.

We hope that future iterations of our digital map continue to expand and include the vast and vibrant array of ASOs currently active in Canada.

Overview of Research Project

Funded by SSHRC, the “Mapping Canadian Arts-Service Organizations as Cultural Research Conduits” project was led by Dr. Miranda Campbell at Ryerson University in collaboration with Mass Culture. The goals of this project were to map ASOs in Canada at the national, provincial, local, and grassroots levels, and to quantify the nature of this sector, including size, activities, and employment / staffing. We also explored how ASOs generate research, including through collaboration.

Our research took place in two phases. First, we launched an online survey, distributed through Mass Culture’s network, asking ASO Executive Directors to fill out information about their ASO. After our survey circulation period closed, we noted the absence of representation from some provinces and territories, and so relaunched the survey with targeted outreach so that our digital map could be truly national in scope with representation of ASOs from coast to coast to coast. In total we have 120 ASOs featured on this iteration of the map, though we recognize that the ASO sector is more expansive than the ASOs we were able to reach through our online survey.

Next, we conducted semi-structured interviews, in English and in French, with Executive Directors from ASOs about their roles and the organizational features of their ASOs. Excerpts from these interviews are reported anonymously here, to avoid identifying any particular individuals or organizations, while at the same time identifying illustrative themes from the interviews. In total 21 interviews were conducted.

Our data reveals that there is much more work to be done: smaller ASOs still struggle to make connections to share resources, and larger ASOs continue to think through the challenges of equity, diversity, and inclusion in their goals and membership. Below, we provide a research snapshot from both our online survey and our interviews of themes concerning ASO roles, working practices, social impacts, collaborations, and research.

Digital Map

This interactive digital map provides public access to a research snapshot based on information collected in a survey completed by over 100 ASOs across Canada.

Access the map here: <https://aso-map.massculture.ca/#>

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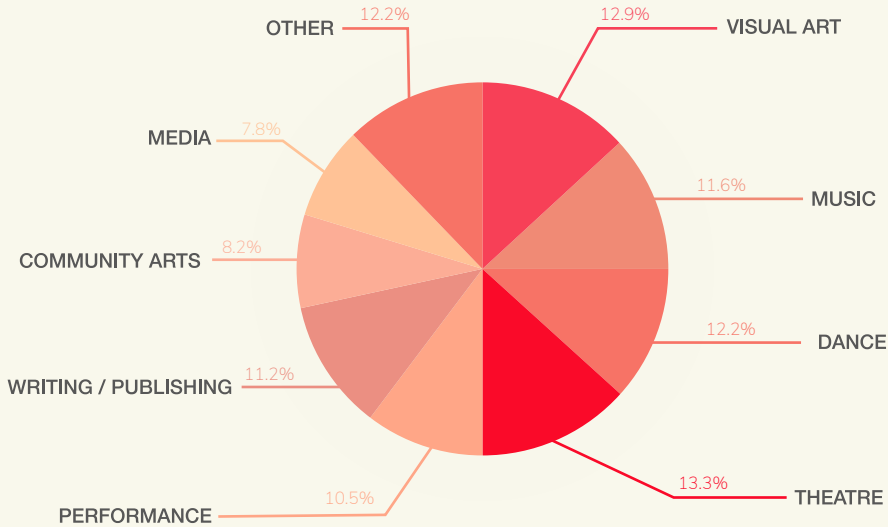


Role

ASOs function as conduits between artists, communities, and government. Essentially, they serve to represent groups of artists and/or organizations across disciplines in order to advocate and provide resources to an array of creative professionals, forging connections between organizations and individuals. ASOs play a crucial role in maintaining and advocating for the arts in Canada. In our data, we mapped ASOs operating at a local (18%), provincial (43%), and national (39%) scale. Our data showed ASOs primarily registered as non-for-profit (64%) or charity organizations (27%), and relying heavily on volunteers, with minimal permanent staffing. That being said, most ASOs have been active for decades, as they adapt to cater to the ever-shifting landscape of Canadian arts workers.

Interviews with ASO directors indicate an overall focus on community, engagement, and support for their members. As member-oriented organizations, their role primarily revolves around assessing and serving those they represent, resulting in a vast scope of activities that must balance individual and public needs. Because ASOs range significantly--from smaller, community-based organizations, to multi-faceted national operations--they have a diverse set of roles and practices that are uniquely tailored to particular sectors' requirements. However, there are commonalities across organizations that often take the tangible form of providing financing, programming, advocacy, and logistical support to their constituencies. Themes of mentorship and connection come up repeatedly, as ASO directors describe their dedication to developing their respective sectors.

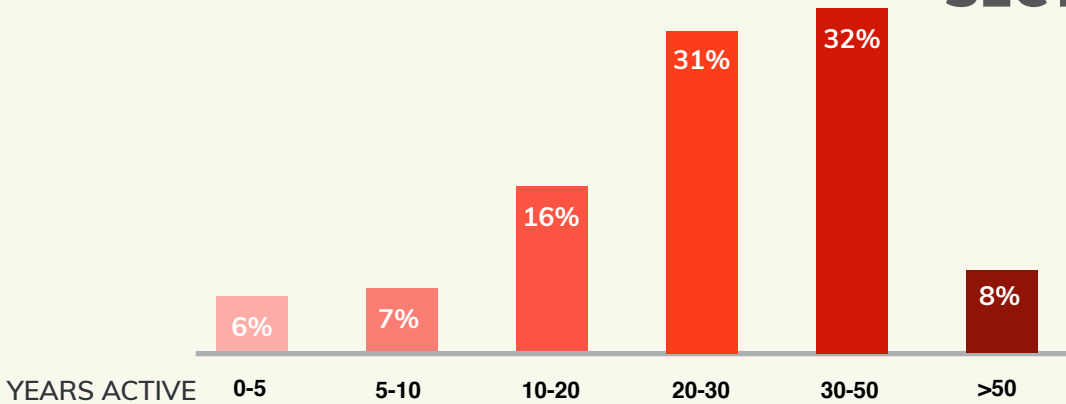
A VIBRANT, MULTI-DISCIPLINARY SECTOR



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Role

A WELL ESTABLISHED SECTOR



RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF ARTISTS AND THE ORGANIZATIONS THAT SERVE THEM

WHO DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION SERVE?



“I think arts service organizations are really good at defining their community and then responding to those community needs or advocating for those community needs. So whether it’s focused on a discipline or it’s focused on a region, I think the reality is that the needs and the messages have to come from those different regionalities or from the different disciplines.”

“The large organizations, I kind of see them as like the trees of the ecosystem, the artists [are] kind of the animal moving around [them], and the branches and stuff are the smaller mid-sized organizations and there’s not like one that’s better or worse... You need everybody.”

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“[L]a mission [c’est] essentiellement à travailler à l’amélioration des conditions de vie des artistes et les travailleurs culturels. Bon, ça peut passer par la formation professionnelle continue, ça peut passer par les études, des recherches, des forums, des activités de réseautages. Chaque activité qu’on fait est vraiment pour mettre – pour mettre l’emphase – pour faire rayonner les pratiques– de mettre de l’avant nos membres individus ou organisations.”

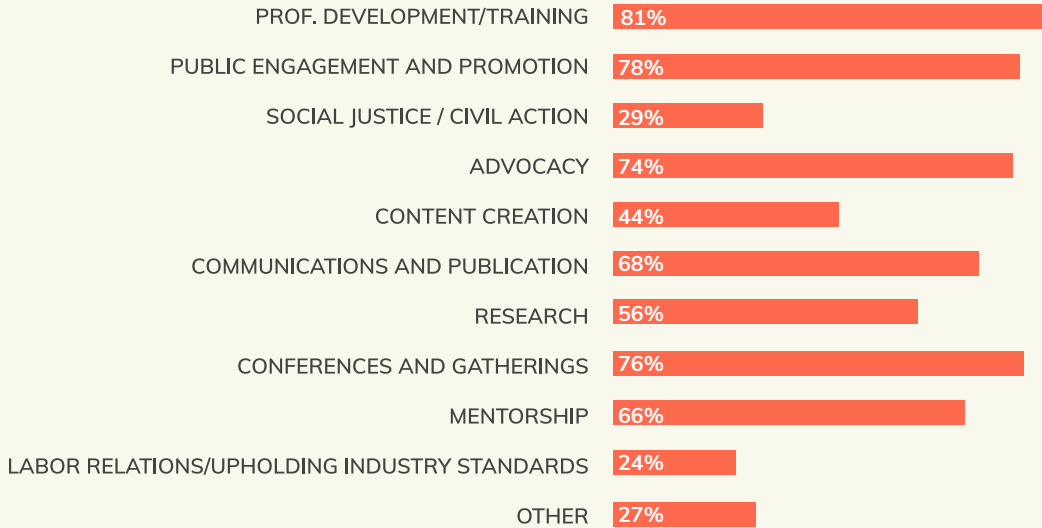
The structure and working practices of ASOs take a variety of forms and are often informed or shaped by the size of the ASO, the scope of their membership and services and their funding models. Many of the LASOs (local or municipal arts service organizations) surveyed and interviewed for this project have fewer than 5 full or part-time paid employees, including their executive directors, while the NASOs (national arts service organizations) reflected on their capacity to fund and support more full and part time employees. Almost all of the ASOs interviewed spoke to the challenges in meeting their desire for increased capacity (often in response to membership needs) and the increasing scarcity of secure, stable funding. ASOs are often expending valuable resources in order to meet the complicated reporting requirements from funders, resources that may be better spent on increasing programming or services to members.

Working Practices

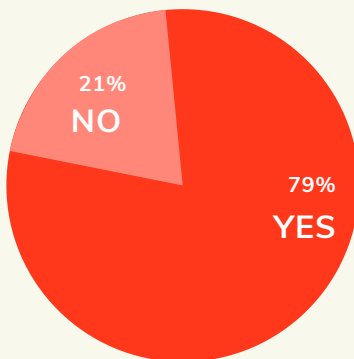
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Many ASOs, particularly grassroots and/or smaller ASOs reflected on their intentionally horizontal and anti-hierarchical organizational structures and how those structures connect back to their community-oriented, grassroots underpinnings. These smaller ASOs also reported a greater sense of flexibility, adaptiveness and responsiveness due to their smaller size and ability to adapt to shifting membership needs and unpredictable or unreliable funding sources. They also face unique challenges in striving to meet the needs of their membership and increase their programming and offerings while working within increasingly limited budgets. Some smaller ASOs have been able to share resources with other community organizations, such as working in shared offices or sharing office administrative or other non-specific staff, and thereby stretch their already stretched-thin budgets.

ASOs PROVIDE A WIDE RANGE OF SERVICES



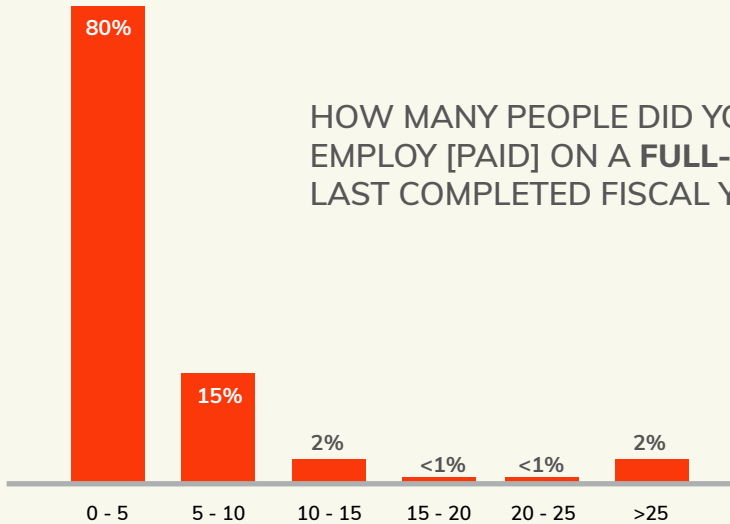
A SECTOR THAT OFTEN REFLECTS ON ITS INTERNAL PRACTICES



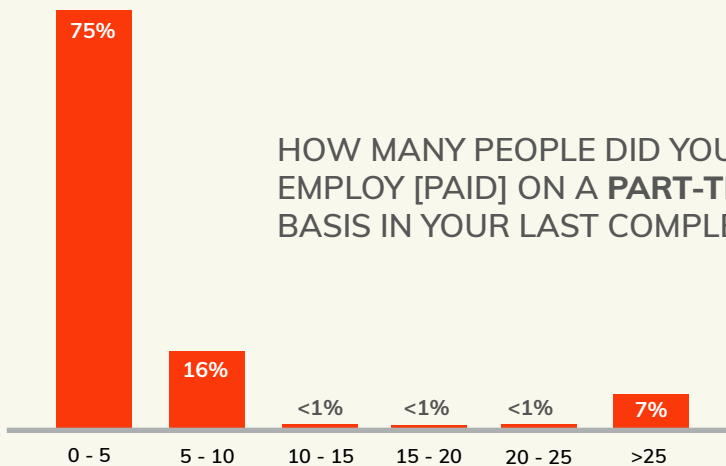
DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION CONDUCT EVALUATION, DIRECTED TOWARDS TESTING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF YOUR ORGANIZATION'S' ACTIVITIES?

A SECTOR THAT WORKS WITH SMALL NUMBERS OF STAFF

HOW MANY PEOPLE DID YOUR ORGANIZATION EMPLOY [PAID] ON A **FULL-TIME** BASIS IN YOUR LAST COMPLETED FISCAL YEAR?



HOW MANY PEOPLE DID YOUR ORGANIZATION EMPLOY [PAID] ON A **PART-TIME/CONTRACT** BASIS IN YOUR LAST COMPLETED FISCAL YEAR?



“A lot of my job [as ED] is taking those dollars and leveraging them for more dollars. And trying to find different streams of funding to allow us to become more active, more sustainable, and really deliver on all of the things that we’ve identified with our community that an ASO, or our ASO, needs to do and accomplish.”

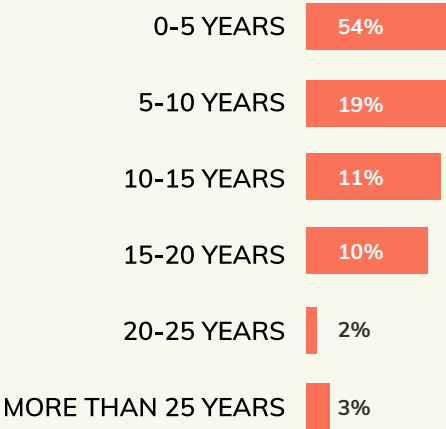
“So our challenges, number one are financial resources, which leads to number two, which is human resources, which leads to number three, which would be our ability to offer more to members of what they need. Despite what I just said, about being flexible and nimble, we still could and should be doing more. No question.”

Social Impact

ASOs have emerged from the need to represent, connect, and advocate for artists and organizations. The desire to have a significant social impact is reflective of this origin, seeing as they function primarily in order to serve their members and communities. That being said, in recent years the ASO sector has had an increasing demand for more equitable structures and representation. The language surrounding diversity and inclusion has proliferated in mandates, addressing this overdue necessity for change. In interviews, executive directors of ASOs speak to a pressing imperative to address these issues, though there is a lack of consistent metrics available to measure these impacts. Standards for diversity and inclusion are often implemented from the top-down by government agencies and funding bodies, and though they are intended to improve diversity and inclusion, they often fail to fully account for what is actually happening on the ground.

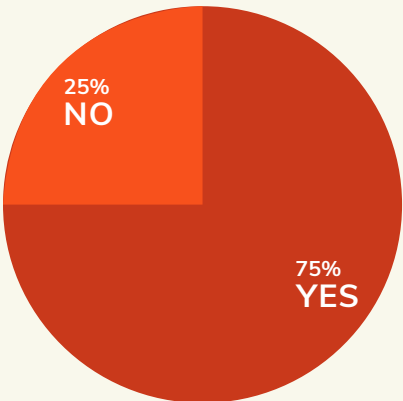
Grassroots ASOs founded in a community-oriented, inclusivity-led ethos continue to struggle to receive sustainable funding. More established ASOs seek new partnerships and strategies in order to improve representation and accessibility. ASOs must balance fixed metrics for inclusivity and diversity, while continuing to interrogate their own practices in order to have encompassing social impact. In our data, many (73%) ASOs provide ongoing mentorship to emerging cultural professionals and/or administrators, contributing to a culture of sharing knowledge, teaching, and learning. Programming dedicated to providing cultural professionals with additional tools and mentorship also serves to uplift and support the wider community. The fundamental role of ASOs is to connect, support, and advocate for their members, which they must balance alongside ongoing goals to improve the quality of their working environment (internally and externally), to increase care for their members, and to work towards true barrier-free access to be more inclusive in their memberships.

A SECTOR WITH NEW LEADERSHIP



HOW LONG HAS THE CURRENT EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR (OR EQUIVALENT) BEEN IN THEIR ROLE IN YOUR ORGANIZATION?

INVESTMENT IN MENTORING THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS



DO YOU MENTOR EMERGING CULTURAL PROFESSIONALS/ ADMINISTRATORS WITHIN YOUR ORGANIZATION?

“[[I]t’s a learning process. And it’s like staying open to a process. And so I think we’re trying to adapt and trying to do better. And I think we are slowly but there’s a long way to go. And there’s still learning that’s happening all the time with those programs.”

“Il y a le défi d’être plus inclusif, il y a le défi de favoriser des relations de travail plus saines, exemple de violence, il y a le défi de notre vie est fondée sur des défis.”

“We’ve learned a lot about radical inclusion and models for radical inclusion from connecting with and learning from other arts service organizations and community arts programs.”

“So it’s not a compendium of diverse artists. It’s a compendium of diverse artists who don’t want to be included, who are seeking autonomy, who are seeking revolutionary change, rather than reformist based change. They’re not just trying to get included. They’re not just using anti oppressive practice to hustle for gigs. They’re actually trying to affect change.”

Collaboration is integral to ASOs given their role as conduits between artists, organizations, and the public. Because they represent a wide range of constituencies, they must operate to meet the needs of their membership, while navigating their own position, and catering to the larger economic and cultural demands of the creative sector in Canada. Survey results indicated that 90% of ASOs have multiple, ongoing partnerships. These collaborations often occur between ASOs, though they extend beyond their own field. In interviews, participants elaborated on the benefits, complexities, and challenges that arise in the context of partnerships. Many organizations form collaborations in order to share resources, such as research and space, as well as in order to reach new communities and offer more diverse programming.

Collaboration

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Often, collaborations arise on a project-to-project basis due to the sporadic nature of funding and limited resources. That being said, the importance of long-term relationships, trust, and aligned values indicate the need for more comprehensive collaborative frameworks. In order for these inter-organizational partnerships to remain sustainable, representatives of each organization work to sustain ongoing, reciprocal relationships with one another. Some participants describe the difficulty in finding and maintaining partnerships, especially the smaller-scale ASOs. This is attributed to the challenges in negotiating time, money, and labour needed to execute a shared project. At times, the labour involved in managing a new partnership exceeds the potential advantages. Some ASOs indicate a desire for a more widespread, formalized network in order to solidify the possibility for new connections. Overall, the benefits of collaboration provide ASOs with increased reach and impact, and allow for resources to be extended and shared.

“[J]e pense que depuis les 5 dernières années on collabore beaucoup plus, au moins au Québec, il y a des coalitions qui se sont formées. Il y a beaucoup de travail, de partage d’outils d’expertise, de rencontres, d’échanges, de soutiens, qu’avant, tout le monde était très niché dans leur discipline et ils ne sortaient pas nécessairement de leur secteur pour des problématiques ou des enjeux.”

“The whole theory of collective impact is that a collaborative effort doesn’t fail because people don’t have good intentions--it doesn’t fail because it’s not a good idea, it fails because people don’t have time to manage it. So that’s where the idea of a backbone organization comes into play around collective impact of here’s somebody who’s going to manage the meetings and take the notes and stay on top of people because you get back to your desk and you’re too busy”

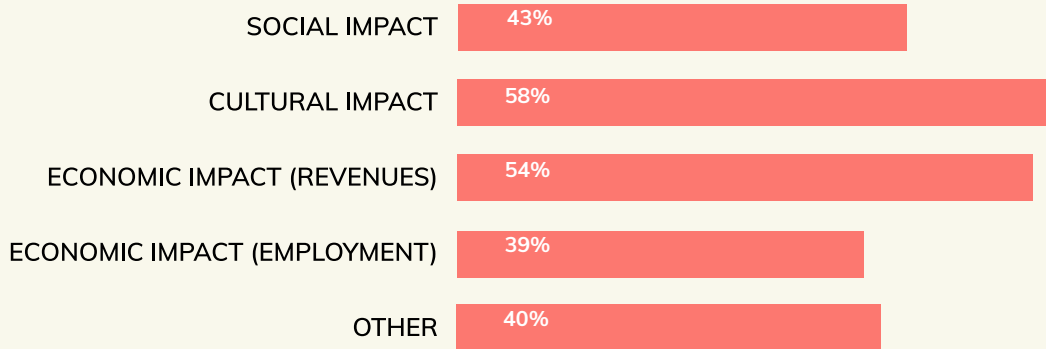
“There’s been a lot of silos [in] the creative sector within our area. And so one of my jobs is to connect people, to connect everyone. Build that communication bridge and really promote collaboration and cross promotion. When we share capacity load, we also share successes as well.”

ASOs engage in a variety of external and internal research practices. Almost all of the ASOs interviewed for this project reported doing internal program evaluations and membership surveys alongside internal evaluations of working practices and other internal structures. Many also work in collaboration with external partners, such as community organizations and academic researchers, on larger-scale research projects such as evaluating sector-wide economic impacts and industry-specific issues and concerns. However for many organizations there remains no clear conduit for sharing research findings with their stakeholders, membership, community-at-large and other ASOs. For some ASOs, this lack of research mobilization is a direct result of the scarcity of financial and other resources. Others may share research within a small, informal network of collaborators and stakeholders, but they desire a more formal conduit through which to share their research findings and access research done by other ASOs.

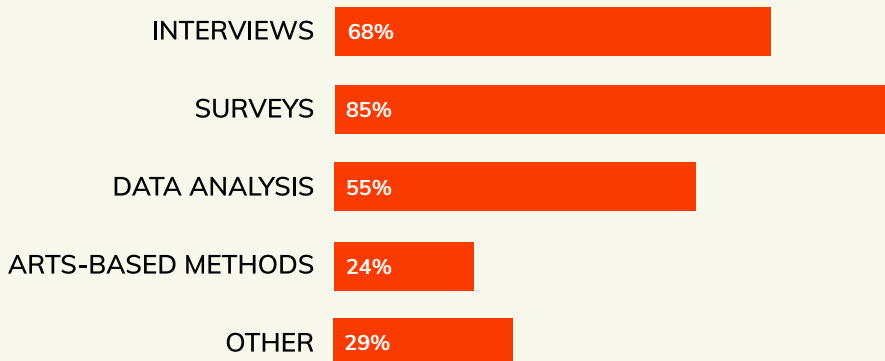
Research

One of the main findings of our project was the lack of consistent language within the ASO sector with which to speak about ASO research practices. Some ASOs were reluctant to view their internal practices, such as program evaluations, membership surveys, community-engaged feedback gathering, as research. Others desire increased connection and sharing with other ASOs in terms of evaluative research frameworks and understandings. This is an area in need of increased attention for both the sector overall and those engaged with ASOs. ASOs recognize the importance of research and the resulting data, particularly when communicating their value to funders and other stakeholders. A concentrated, sector wide effort to improve research frameworks and knowledge conduits would greatly benefit ASOs of all sizes.

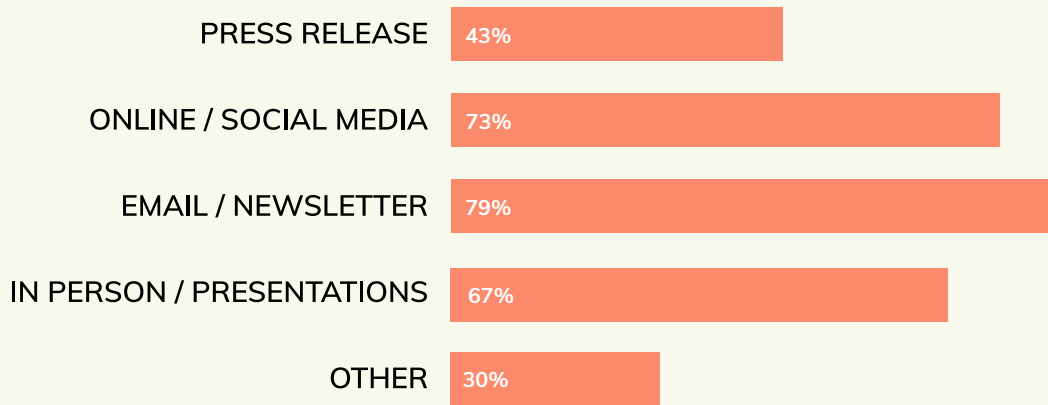
WHAT TYPE OF RESEARCH DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION DO?



HOW DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION DO THIS RESEARCH?



HOW DOES YOUR ORGANIZATION DISSEMINATE YOUR RESEARCH?



“As a smaller ASO one of our biggest challenges is communicating our impact to government funders. Sharing of research tools and frameworks would allow us to do that more easily.”

“We just don’t talk as much as we should. I think it would be lovely to have something that’s set up that allows ASOs to share more of the information that they’re doing or the gaps that they’re really struggling with, because you know that others have struggled with it before, they’ve ... either found a solution or [are] just coming out of it.”

“I know that with me, in terms of our ASO, if we do a conference or if we do develop a professional development workshop, one of the main things is I want to make sure that I build a really good evidence-based report and put it online, so that other people can use it. Because it’s been so difficult to try to find it.”

Conclusion

The ASO sector in Canada is vast, with differences in regions, discipline, size and scope in various organizations. These differences might suggest differences in kind rather than differences in degree, yet we still think there is value and impact in talking about ASOs as a sector. Many ASOs are committed to important yet challenging work: identifying and communicating the intrinsic and instrumental value of the arts, advocating for artists and for art in communities, and working to diversify membership and outputs alongside creating more inclusive working conditions. Given the scope of this work and the challenges of funding and staffing in this sector, the importance of learning from one another and sharing knowledge and resources is paramount. ASOs can struggle to find the means, the time, the resources, and the opportunity for knowledge transfer and learning. We hope our map can offer a preliminary foray into allowing the sector to see itself visually, and we hope to provide one layer of a connective tissue to work towards fostering these mechanisms for exchange.

