



Arts and Art Education

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Chapter Six | Arts and Humanities: Essentials, Not Extras

by Dr. Neal A. Lester

Traumatic experiences — the global crisis ISIS has created, Ebola scares, hurricanes, the Aurora shootings, local tragedies in our families or neighborhoods — are significant spaces of the everyday where we dwell most often, trying to make sense of our lives and these often-senseless events. As we pondered and strategized on how not to plunge over a financial cliff back into economic recession some months ago, how do we understand the everyday within the context of a more complicated and nuanced sense of how we define our lives and how we live our lives?

I am not one who imagines that money, economics, and finances don't matter when it comes to the quality of our everyday lives. I remain concerned about how our government deals with the federal deficit in such a way that doesn't strangle our grandchildren and their children. But I am not fully convinced that our successes in the world are dependent only on global competition with science, business, and technology leading the way. That both Governor Romney and President Obama in their respective Newsweek (29 October 2012) essays on the state of American higher education cited "science" as the ticket to America's success and financial recovery both inside and beyond the classroom seemed shortsighted. Romney insisted: "We are rightly proud of our extraordinary universities and other institutions of higher learning. Many of the most important scientific breakthroughs occur

in their labs.... Their institutions promote inquiry, inspire creativity and ultimately prepare our citizens for success." While there is a nod toward creativity in his comment, the weight is on success than on being a good citizen as a marker of success. Jobs can make us better citizens, but jobs need not and cannot be allowed to define us as individuals or to define our individual and collective successes.

Obama, while focusing on the value of good teachers, also specified adding "100,000 math and science teachers" to his plan for education reform during this re-election campaign. These are noble gestures indeed, and one would be hard pressed not to recognize the value of what was proposed. Yet other leaders made no mention of how humanities and arts do in fact lead to economic and business successes. Arts and humanities students are entrepreneurial and in fact often gain skills that businesses want because of their nimbleness and their emphasis on imagination and possibility.

Imagination, possibility and an awareness of the past lead to innovation. Conversations about economic recovery cannot and should not be devoid of the vital role that arts and humanities play in enabling us to understand, to interpret, and to assess progress on all fronts. Are success on the global market and a "good job" the only markers of America's progress? As one administrator has penned, "humanities do not teach us what to do; humanities teach us how to be." Whether it be though learning another language, reading and analyzing a book, understanding the connection



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between language and critical thinking, or reflecting on a dance performance or photo exhibition about surviving Hurricane Katrina, humanities and arts matter.

A Harvard University President has said that “Humans need meaning and perspective as well as jobs.”(16, May 2013) It is essential as a society, that we facilitate open discussions specifically addressing the strategies and decisions imposed directly on our educational institutions and the negative financial impact it has on everyday peoples lives. This is the value of the humanities--to underscore the ties that bind us as humans trying to make sense of our everyday lives; providing us with the tools to imagine the infinite possibilities of our everyday lives. When Congresswoman Gabby Giffords was severely wounded and recovering - familiar childhood nursery rhymes helped her regain her memory. Humor therapy assisted many of the other survivors of the Tucson Tragedy. To understand the present-day manifestations of racism, one has only to look at its roots in American slavery. Arts and humanities are like the air we breathe. It's so easy to take them for granted yet not even think of them as essential until we are suffocating or in desperate need of something or someone to ease our pain to validate our life experiences. Herein lies the value of the arts and humanities, not altogether disconnected from STEM but rather that which fills those in-between spaces and places of the essential and the everyday.

Economic and Cultural Drives that Sustain the Arts

If one is interested in obtaining an arts education, one might choose to go to a school that focuses on the arts. This realization comes only after having a child who was interested in graphic design, and recognizing the neighborhood school that we were zoned for, focused more on the core subjects, which were driven by the outcomes of testing. We know that as school funding is more concentrated on testing and common core standards, arts become less of a focal point or sadly not the priority at all, while the arts and humanities are chiseled away. It doesn't look bleak, but it doesn't look overly optimistic that things will change in the distant future. There seems to be a struggle to define why the arts are relevant in our educational curriculum. When determining the economic or cultural drivers to sustain the arts, in our own state, we need to talk about the economic impact of whatever it is we are doing. As a person who has been an advocate for humanities - as a chair of the Arizona Humanities council and has served on a board of an arts education organization , I have learned that what drives us is dollars. It's important to identify the ways in which whatever it is that you do moves beyond the warm and fuzzies, or if people simply enjoyed the event. It is not just about the people that sit in the seats but how much of the economy is being boosted by bringing people into art shows, galleries, museums, libraries, and those kinds of places. Humanities organizations are now talking





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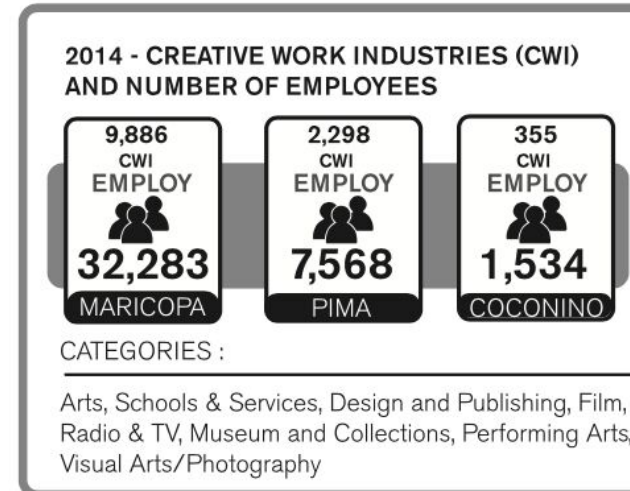
about this from that end, in terms of products; how many dollars came in to the state as a result of the arts. This is what drives states to athletics. The reason why states run after large sporting events, like the Super Bowl, is because those events attract tourists and tourists spend money, and money boosts the economy.

The arts have festivals - and yes, they bring in people, but not with the same momentum that has been established sports. The economic impact of those who attend local 3-day arts events is not clear. Attendees often pick up cards of vendors and exhibitors with the promise to purchase at a later date. Again, in many ways it's about dollars. Although, one would wish to say it is about the impact, it really is not. You would like to say that you can measure the impact that the arts have on society, based on how people effect our community. We wish that we could say what drives us is based on the data showing how someone visiting libraries or museums were encouraged to become involved in public policy, verses someone who didn't, but sadly it's not about that.

Impact on the Arts Community. Intrinsic Value?

I believe that you can measure the value of the arts by looking at museum-going behavior. I have worked with a graduate student who did specific research

on The Carver museum, and wrote her thesis on the going habits of African Americans, specifically. Some of the questions posed were: if you had free time where would you go; a museum, a movie, or a park? Many ways those choices have been driven by economics because more people want a piece of the pie, but the pie of available funding hasn't gotten any bigger, thus requiring us to find a different way to slice the pie. The question becomes what is the return on the investment? How much revenue is this bringing into the state?



Americans for the Arts, Creative Industries:
Business & Employment in the Arts.
Data current as of January 2014

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Whether people enjoy it or not isn't the question per se, the question becomes, "is this something that is worth sustaining?" Some of the people who are in office don't value the arts, so this becomes the issue. Art is everywhere. Once you recognize if you strip the art from the Mayo clinic, the airport, or take down all of the art exhibits that you see, or even those that you might not stop and look at, the art you see at the hospitals. If you take away the music that is piping in at the restaurants or the hotels, then you will recognize the value. We have not gotten to that point. It's just like air. Nobody stops to think about breathing until you are in a yoga class and you are told to stop and think about your breathing, or in the doctor's office and are asked to breathe. You take breathing for granted until you begin to suffocate. We have not hit that crisis moment where art will go away, which is impossible because people will always create.

On the decision making level, until we get people in there making decisions who really value arts and are willing to fight for it, we will continue to have conversations about the "value of arts". Every time the arts budget is an agenda item to be discussed, the question will be whether to cut funding, which will lead to a crisis. After which, everyone will get on social media and starting rallying to save our arts programs, and they will eventually agree on a percentage to award us, and we will be relieved for what we get. The real power of the arts is that regardless if we are represented as a culture, we will continue to create. The reality is, that you must have policy driving you or you risk becoming extinct.

Funding Programs as Valuable

First, one must recognize that the entity cannot be totally dependent upon the federal or state to sustain its livelihood. It's like a parent telling a grown child that they cannot forever be dependent on their parent, even if the parent has the ability to do it. One strategy that has been successful is diversifying funding sources. Arts and humanities can be partnered with multiple disciplines which justifies why what we do matters to multiple stakeholders, even on a federal level. By partnering with these other entities, such as the National Science Foundation the NEA and the NEH was able to access additional funding because the projects had a component of them all.

So often, institutions don't get funding because they lack the resources or the skill set to access the funding. For example, grant writing is a skill set and if you lack the ability to write a grant or don't have the funding to hire a grant writer, you won't get funding. Many times this has nothing to do with the value of the content of the program, rather the skill set.

There is also a culture that has to be worked through to know how to access the resources available. Unfortunately, there is excess funding available at the close of the fiscal year, but many churches and civic or community organizations just don't ask for the funds because they don't know they are available. We must find a way to get the word out to those organizations that might be aware of funding for their programs.



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Public Views and Opinion on the Arts

Marketing and selling of the arts have yet to be done in a way to make people feel comfortable. Again, the arts and humanities pie has not gotten any bigger, yet more people desire a taste of it. However, there is a general perception that art is valued by the general public. You see people at festivals and I have yet to go to museum where no one is there or even a library or a national park that is empty. To speak to how arts and humanities enriches the quality of life, there was a furlough and the Grand Canyon was shut down, the state stepped up and provided funding to keep this state attraction open. This spoke volumes about the larger public interest in public facilities. Going to the Desert Botanical Garden isn't just aesthetics but adds to the quality of life.

You cannot walk into a corporate office now without seeing beautiful artwork pieces or paintings. Whether it is the Greater Black Chamber of Commerce, APS, or your local churches. Many of these establishments' walls are adorned with pictures, sculptures, and pieces from local artists. We need to continue to support our artists as well. There are ways in which we are supporting them, but we can do more. Performers need to be paid for their work and we not just assume they will do it "pro bono". We wouldn't ask a business to do things for free? Likewise, artists need to value themselves. Programs need to charge a fee, even if it is minimal. This shows that it

takes money to put the show on so there is a value placed on it. People will go to the Celebrity Theater and see an old school concert, etc. There is a public awareness of the arts, but it isn't uniform or consistent. We will go to a concert, but will not spend the same dollars to go to a museum. We must find a way to bridge this gap.

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Statue of George Washington Carver
by Mr. Ed Dwight



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