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Gifts of the Muse

*Reframing the Debate
About the Benefits of the Arts*

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Summary

Current arguments for private and public investment in the arts emphasize the potential of the arts for serving broad social and economic goals. This emphasis is a fairly recent phenomenon. As late as the 1960s and 1970s, the value of the arts was still a given for the American public. By the early 1990s, however, the social and political pressures that culminated in what became known as the “culture wars” put pressure on arts advocates to articulate the public value of the arts. Their response was to emphasize the *instrumental* benefits of the arts: They said the arts promote important, measurable benefits, such as economic growth and student learning, and thus are of value to all Americans, not just those involved in the arts.

Such benefits are instrumental in that the arts are viewed as a means of achieving broad social and economic goals that have nothing to do with art *per se*. Policy advocates acknowledge that these are not the sole benefits stemming from the arts, that the arts also “enrich people’s lives.” But the main argument downplays these other, *intrinsic* benefits in aligning itself with an increasingly output-oriented, quantitative approach to public sector management. And underlying the argument is the belief that there is a clear distinction between private benefits, which accrue to individuals, and public benefits, which accrue to society as a whole.

Some arts advocates and researchers have expressed skepticism about the validity of arguments for the arts’ instrumental benefits, and there is a general awareness that these arguments ignore the intrinsic benefits the arts provide to individuals and the public. So far, however, little analysis has been conducted that would help inform public discourse about these issues.

Study Purpose and Approach

The goal of the study described here was to improve the current understanding of the arts’ full range of effects in order to inform public debate and policy. The study entailed reviewing all benefits associated with the arts, analyzing how they may be created, and examining how they accrue to individuals and the public through different forms of arts participation.

The basis of our study was an extensive review of published sources of several kinds. First, we reviewed the evidence for the instrumental benefits of the arts. Second, we reviewed conceptual theories from multiple disciplines we thought might provide insights about how such effects are generated, a subject largely ignored by empirical studies of the arts' instrumental benefits. Third, we reviewed the literature on the intrinsic effects of the arts, including works of aesthetics, philosophy, and art criticism. And finally, we reviewed the literature on participation in the arts to help us identify factors that give individuals access to the arts and the benefits they provide. This report synthesizes the findings from these sources and proposes a new way of thinking about the benefits of the arts.

The view we propose is broader than the current view. It incorporates both intrinsic and instrumental benefits and distinguishes among the ways they affect the public welfare. This framework acknowledges that the arts can have both private and public value, but also draws distinctions between benefits on the basis of whether they are primarily of private benefit, primarily of public benefit, or a combination of the two.

Figure S.1 illustrates the framework, showing instrumental benefits on top and intrinsic benefits on the bottom, both arranged along a continuum from private to public. On the private end of the scale are benefits *primarily* of value to individuals. On the public end are benefits *primarily* of value to the public—that is, to communities of people or to society as a whole. And in the middle are benefits that both enhance individuals' personal lives and have a desirable spillover effect on the public sphere.

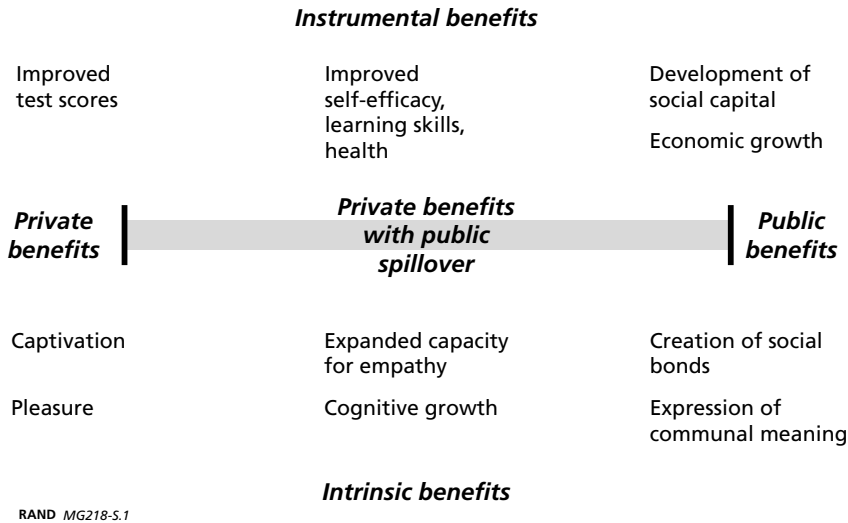
We used this framework to examine both instrumental and intrinsic benefits in more detail, and we use it in this report to present our findings. In the process, we argue for an understanding of the benefits of arts involvement that recognizes not only the contribution that both intrinsic and instrumental benefits make to the public welfare, but also the central role intrinsic benefits play in generating *all* benefits deriving from the arts, and the importance of developing policies to ensure that the benefits of the arts are realized by greater numbers of Americans.

The Case for Instrumental Benefits

This report categorizes and summarizes the instrumental benefits claimed in the empirical studies:

- **Cognitive.** Studies of cognitive benefits focus on the development of learning skills and academic performance in school-aged youth. These benefits fall into three major categories: improved academic performance and test scores; im-

Figure S.1
Framework for Understanding the Benefits of the Arts



proved basic skills, such as reading and mathematical skills and the capacity for creative thinking; and improved attitudes and skills that promote the learning process itself, particularly the ability to learn how to learn.

- **Attitudinal and behavioral.** The literature on attitudinal and behavioral benefits also focuses on the young. Three types of benefits are discussed in this literature: development of attitudes (e.g., self-discipline, self-efficacy) and behaviors (e.g., more frequent school attendance, reduced dropout rates) that improve school performance; development of more-general life skills (e.g., understanding the consequences of one’s behavior, working in teams); and development of pro-social attitudes and behaviors among “at risk” youth (e.g., building social bonds, improving self-image).
- **Health.** The literature on the therapeutic effects of the arts can be classified by types of effects and populations studied. These include improved mental and physical health, particularly among the elderly and those who exhibit signs of dementia from Alzheimer’s disease; improved health for patients with specific health problems (e.g., premature babies, the mentally and physically handicapped, patients with Parkinson’s disease, those suffering from acute pain and depression); reduced stress and improved performance for caregivers; and reduced anxiety for patients facing surgery, childbirth, or dental procedures.
- **Social.** The literature on community-level social benefits focuses on two general categories: those benefits that promote social interaction among community members, create a sense of community identity, and help build social capital;

and those that build a community's organizational capacity through both the development of skills, infrastructures, leaders and other assets, and the more general process of people organizing and getting involved in civic institutions and volunteer associations.

- **Economic.** There are three principal categories of economic benefits: direct benefits (i.e., those that result from the arts as an economic activity and thus are a source of employment, tax revenue, and spending); indirect benefits (e.g., attraction of individuals and firms to locations where the arts are available); and a variety of "public-good" benefits (e.g., the availability of the arts, the ability to have the arts available for the next generation, and the contribution the arts make to a community's quality of life).

The report also provides an assessment of the quality of this body of research. We found that a small number of studies provide strong evidence for cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral benefits, but the available studies of health and social benefits were limited in terms of data and methodology, particularly the lack of longitudinal data. We found the research on economic effects to be the most advanced, but more analysis of the relative effects of spending on the arts versus other forms of spending is needed.

Overall, we found that most of the empirical research on instrumental benefits suffers from a number of conceptual and methodological limitations:

- **Weaknesses in empirical methods.** Many studies are based on weak methodological and analytical techniques and, as a result, have been subject to considerable criticism. For example, many of these studies do no more than establish correlations between arts involvement and the presence of certain effects in the study subjects. They do not demonstrate that arts experiences caused the effects.
- **Absence of specificity.** There is a lack of critical specifics about such issues as how the claimed benefits are produced, how they relate to different types of arts experiences, and under what circumstances and for which populations they are most likely to occur. Without these specifics, it is difficult to judge how much confidence to place in the findings and how to generalize from the empirical results.
- **Failure to consider opportunity costs.** The fact that the benefits claimed can all be produced in other ways is ignored. Cognitive benefits can be produced by better education (such as providing more-effective reading and mathematics courses), just as economic benefits can be generated by other types of social investment (such as a new sports stadium or transportation infrastructure). An argument based entirely on the instrumental effects of the arts runs the risk of being discredited if other activities are more effective at generating the same effects or if policy priorities shift. Because the literature on instrumental benefits

fails to consider the comparative advantages of the arts in producing instrumental effects, it is vulnerable to challenge on these grounds.

To address the second weakness—lack of specificity—we explored how effective different types of arts experiences may be in creating specific benefits. For example, we broke arts education into four types of arts experiences: an arts-rich school environment, art used as a learning tool, art incorporated into non-arts classes (such as history), and direct instruction in the arts. This approach highlights the special advantages that hands-on involvement in the arts can bring; it also suggests the types of effects that might be expected from the different forms of exposure, as well as why some of these effects may be more significant and long-lasting than others. One of the key insights from this analysis is that the most important instrumental benefits require sustained involvement in the arts.

The Missing Element: Intrinsic Benefits

People are drawn to the arts not for their instrumental effects, but because the arts can provide them with meaning and with a distinctive type of pleasure and emotional stimulation. We contend not only that these intrinsic effects are satisfying in themselves, but that many of them can lead to the development of individual capacities and community cohesiveness that are of benefit to the public sphere.

We think that art can best be understood as a communicative cycle in which the artist draws upon two unusual gifts—a capacity for vivid personal experience of the world, and a capacity to express that experience through a particular artistic medium. A work of art is “a bit of ‘frozen’ potential communication” (Taylor, 1989, p. 526) that can be received only through direct personal experience of it. Unlike most communication, which takes place through discourse, art communicates through felt experience, and it is the personal, subjective response to a work of art that imparts intrinsic benefits.

We challenge the widely held view that intrinsic benefits are purely of value to the individual, however. We contend that some intrinsic benefits are largely of private value, others are of value to the individual *and* have valuable public spillover effects, and still others are largely of value to society as a whole (see Figure S.1, above). We place the following intrinsic benefits at the primarily private end of the value range:

- **Captivation.** The initial response of rapt absorption, or captivation, to a work of art can briefly but powerfully move the individual away from habitual, everyday reality and into a state of focused attention. This reaction to a work of art can

connect people more deeply to the world and open them to new ways of seeing and experiencing the world.

- **Pleasure.** The artist provides individuals with an imaginative experience that is often a more intense, revealing, and meaningful version of actual experience. Such an experience can produce pleasure in the sense of deep satisfaction, a category that includes the satisfaction associated with works of art the individual finds deeply unsettling, disorienting, or tragic.

Intrinsic benefits in the middle range of private-to-public value have to do with the individual's capacity to perceive, feel, and interpret the world. The result of recurrent experiences, these benefits spill over into the public realm in the form of individuals who are more empathetic and more discriminating in their judgments of the world around them:

- **Expanded capacity for empathy.** The arts expand individuals' capacities for empathy by drawing them into the experiences of people vastly different from them and cultures vastly different from their own. These experiences give individuals new references that can make them more receptive to unfamiliar people, attitudes, and cultures.
- **Cognitive growth.** The intrinsic benefits described above all have cognitive dimensions. When individuals focus their attention on a work of art, they are "invited" to make sense of what is before them. Because meanings are embedded in the experience rather than explicitly stated, the individual can gain an entirely new perspective on the world and how he or she perceives it.

Finally, some intrinsic benefits fall at the public end of the scale. In this case, the benefits to the public arise from the collective effects that the arts have on individuals:

- **Creation of social bonds.** When people share the experience of works of art, either by discussing them or by communally experiencing them, one of the intrinsic benefits is the social bonds that are created. This benefit is different from the instrumental social benefits that the arts offer.
- **Expression of communal meanings.** Intrinsic benefits accrue to the public sphere when works of art convey what whole communities of people yearn to express. Examples of what can produce these benefits are art that commemorates events significant to a nation's history or a community's identity, art that provides a voice to communities the culture at large has largely ignored, and art that critiques the culture for the express purpose of changing people's views.

How Individuals Gain Access to the Benefits

A wide range of benefits can be gained from involvement in the arts, but we contend that many of them—and particularly those most often cited by arts advocates—are gained only through a process of sustained involvement. Three factors help explain how individuals become involved in the arts and thus gain access to the benefits the arts offer.

The gateway experiences that acquaint individuals with the arts constitute the first factor. Although these initial experiences can occur at any age, they appear to be the most conducive to future arts involvement if they happen when people are young (that is, of school age, particularly pre-teen). The second factor is the quality of the arts experience: Individuals whose experiences are fully engaging—emotionally, mentally, and sometimes socially—are the ones who continue to be involved in the arts. Continued involvement develops the competencies that change individual tastes and enrich subsequent arts experience. The third factor, which is the key difference between individuals who participate frequently in the arts and those who do so only occasionally, is the intrinsic worth of the arts experience to the individual. Those who continue to be involved seek arts experiences because they find them stimulating, uplifting, challenging—that is, intrinsically worthwhile—whereas those who participate in the arts infrequently tend to participate for extrinsic reasons (such as accompanying someone to an arts event). The model of the participation process that we developed not only highlights these points, but also suggests how to build involvement in, and therefore demand for, the arts.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The study's key policy implication is that policy should be geared toward spreading the benefits of the arts by introducing greater numbers of Americans to engaging arts experiences. This focus requires that attention and resources be shifted away from supply of the arts and toward cultivation of demand. Such a demand-side approach will help build a market for the arts by developing the capacity of individuals to gain benefits from their arts experiences. Calls to broaden, diversify, and deepen participation in the arts are, of course, hardly novel, but efforts along these lines have so far been hampered by a lack of guiding principles. Our analysis of how individuals develop a life-long commitment to the arts suggests a variety of ways in which to promote this objective.

Based on our study, we recommend a number of steps the arts community might take to redirect its emphasis, shifting it toward the promotion of satisfying arts experiences:

- **Develop language for discussing intrinsic benefits.** The arts community will need to develop language to describe the various ways that the arts create benefits at both the private and the public level. The greatest challenge will be to bring the policy community to explicitly recognize the importance of intrinsic benefits. This will require an effort to raise awareness about the need to look beyond quantifiable results and examine qualitative issues.
- **Address the limitations of the research on instrumental benefits.** Since arts advocates are not likely to (and should not) abandon benefits arguments in making the case for the arts, it is important that they be more specific in how they make that case in order to develop the credibility of the arguments. Future research should take advantage of the theoretical and methodological insights available in the non-arts literature. Moreover, future research should not continue to be limited to instrumental benefits.
- **Promote early exposure to the arts.** Research has shown that early exposure is often key to developing life-long involvement in the arts. That exposure typically comes from arts education, community-based arts programs, and/or commercial entertainment. The most promising way to develop audiences for the arts would be to provide well-designed programs in the nation's schools. But this approach would require more funding, greater cooperation between educators and arts professionals, and the implementation of effective arts education programs that incorporate appreciation, discussion, and analysis of art works as well as creative production. Community-based arts programs, if well designed and executed, could also be an effective way to introduce youth to the arts, but they tend to be severely limited in resources. Another way to facilitate early arts involvement would be to tap into young people's involvement in the commercial arts. High schools, for example, might consider offering film classes that engage students in discussions of some of the best American and international films.
- **Create circumstances for rewarding arts experiences.** Arts organizations should consider it part of their responsibility to educate their audiences to appreciate the arts.

Most of the benefits of the arts come from individual experiences that are mentally and emotionally engaging, experiences that can be shared and deepened through reflection, conversations, and reading. The strategies we recommend for building arts involvement would help make these experiences accessible to greater numbers of Americans.