



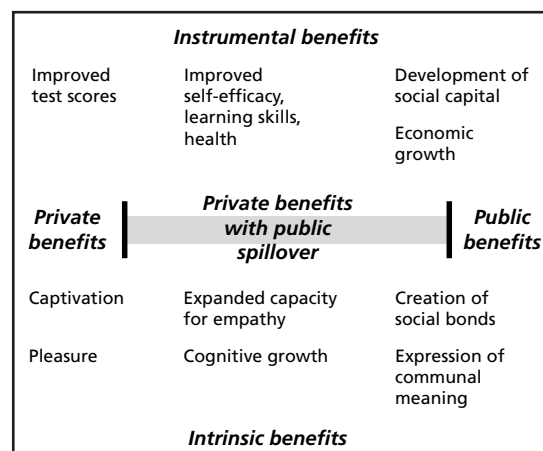
Reframing the Debate About the Value of the Arts

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The public value of the arts has been a topic of debate since the culture wars of the early 1990s. Today’s prevailing view is that the arts have public value because they promote broad social and economic goals, such as economic growth and better academic performance. These benefits are called “instrumental” because the arts are seen as an instrument for achieving them. The intrinsic benefits of the arts experience, such as aesthetic pleasure and captivation, are viewed as having strictly private, personal value. They are primarily qualitative and thus less amenable than the instrumental benefits to the increasingly results-oriented, quantitative approach that characterizes public policy analysis.

A new report, *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts*, challenges this view. The study, commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, offers a new framework for understanding the value of the arts, one that recognizes how both intrinsic and instrumental benefits contribute to the public realm and underscores the central role of intrinsic benefits in generating all arts benefits. The authors also examine how such benefits are generated through different kinds of

Framework for Understanding the Benefits of the Arts



Abstract

Over the years, political pressures have prompted arts supporters to emphasize that the public value of the arts lies in their contribution to broad social and economic goals, such as economic growth and improved student performance. This study urges a new approach that recognizes how both instrumental and intrinsic benefits of the arts contribute to the public realm. Based on this view, the authors argue for a policy shift that would make the arts available to greater numbers of people.

arts experiences and call for policies designed to engage more Americans in the arts.

New Framework

The new framework distinguishes among the benefits of the arts along two different dimensions—type of benefit (instrumental, intrinsic) and the way in which the benefits produce private and public value (see the figure). Instrumental and intrinsic benefits are placed along a continuum ranging from primarily personal, or private, benefits to primarily public benefits. In between are benefits that enhance individual lives and have a spillover effect on the public sphere.

Instrumental Benefits

The report describes the empirical research on a wide range of instrumental benefits (see the table on the next page). The authors acknowledge the strength of a number of the studies, but they also find many weaknesses in this body of research. The methods used, for example, often lack empirical rigor as well as a comprehensive theoretical explanation for the claimed benefits. And many of the studies fail to capture the range of ways in which

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Summary of Instrumental Benefits Claimed in the Literature

Type of benefit	Improvements in:
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employment, tax revenues, spending • Attraction of high-quality workforce
Cognitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic performance • Basic skills, such as reading and math skills • Learning process
Behavioral and attitudinal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitudes toward school (attendance rates) • Self-discipline, self-efficacy • Pro-social behavior among at-risk youth
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental and physical health among elderly (especially Alzheimer's patients) • Reduced anxiety in face of surgery, childbirth
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social interaction, community identity • Social capital • Community capacity for collective action

the arts can provide benefits, oversimplify the links between benefits and forms of arts participation, and generally ignore the fact that the arts are only one way to achieve these benefits. In sum, the research on instrumental arts benefits offers stronger evidence for the possibility of such benefits than it does proof of their magnitude or how they are produced.

Intrinsic Benefits: The Missing Link

Generally overlooked in this approach is an appreciation of the intrinsic benefits of the arts—those effects inherent in the arts experience itself. The authors point out that two essential aspects of intrinsic benefits are not being recognized. First, individuals participate in the arts *for* the intrinsic benefits of arts experiences—pleasure, stimulation, meaning—not to improve their test scores or to stimulate the economy. In this sense, intrinsic benefits are the starting point for all benefits. Second, as the framework suggests, intrinsic benefits are not strictly private—some of them also contribute to the public welfare.

The authors describe three types of intrinsic benefits. First are the immediate benefits, such as pleasure and captivation, that come from engaging in arts experiences. These motivate individuals to seek more such experiences. The second type is the growth in individual capacities—such as enhanced empathy for other people and cultures, powers of observation, and understanding of the world—that can occur through cumulative arts experiences.

These intrinsic effects enrich individual lives, but they also have a public spillover component in that they cultivate the kinds of citizens desired in a pluralistic society. The third type is the benefits that accrue largely to the public. These are the social bonds created among individuals when they share their arts experiences through reflection and discourse, and the expression of common values and community identity through artworks commemorating events significant to a nation's (or people's) experience.

Importance of Sustained Arts Involvement

One of the report's conclusions is that the most enduring arts benefits, both instrumental and intrinsic, are created through sustained involvement. To identify the factors behind this type of involvement, the authors analyzed the differences between people who participate frequently in the arts and those who participate only occasionally. They found two important distinctions for frequent participants: they had often been exposed to the arts when young—that is, early arts experiences provided a gateway to future involvement—and they were motivated to seek future experiences by the high quality of their arts experiences. Such strong experiences are marked by high levels of engagement—emotional, mental, and sometimes social. In other words, the individual's capacity to become fully engaged in arts experiences is fundamental to gaining value from the arts.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The authors claim that the current overemphasis on instrumental benefits not only undervalues the arts but also fails to provide a sound basis for decisions in support of the arts. They assert that the key to spreading the benefits of the arts is to engage greater numbers of Americans in the arts, which means that attention and resources must be balanced between building the supply of the arts and cultivating demand. Recommendations for promoting these goals are offered:

- Develop language for discussing intrinsic benefits that is clear and compelling and reflects the importance of qualitative as well as quantitative issues.
- Promote early exposure to the arts through schools and community programs.
- Encourage arts organizations to provide experiences that connect with and reward their audiences.
- Address the limitations of the research on instrumental benefits and encourage research on the intrinsic benefits of the arts. ■

This research brief describes work conducted within RAND Enterprise Analysis, a unit of the RAND Corporation. The work is documented in *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate About the Benefits of the Arts* by Kevin F. McCarthy, Elizabeth H. Ondaatje, Laura Zakaras, and Arthur Brooks, MG-218-WF, 2005, 124 pp., \$20, ISBN: 0-8330-3694-7, available at <http://www.rand.org/publications/MG/MG218/>. It is also available from RAND Distribution Services (phone: 310-451-7002; toll free 877-584-8642; or email: order@rand.org). The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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