

Forum

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Valuing Art and the Humanities

TO THE EDITOR:

In responding to Wai Chee Dimock's column "Experimental Humanities" (vol. 132, no. 2, Mar. 2017, pp. 241–49), Doris Sommer stresses the importance of measurable criteria in the humanities ("Measuring Success in the Humanities" [vol. 132, no. 5, Oct. 2017, pp. 1266–67]). It can certainly be proven that art enriches society. In practical terms, sustained artistic projects improve the economic life of the communities from which they spring. Indeed, the arts generate tremendous revenue over the long term—nourishing these communities through festivals and performances or through a general aesthetic achieved by excellence in design. Art, at its best, draws people in and inspires strong feelings within them. In many cases, it propels audience members to seek some involvement with the medium that has touched them.

When contemplated as a strategy for civic improvement, Sommer's initiatives would likely strike many as desirable and even necessary. Turning artists who create informally and without invitation into respected, contributing community members is an excellent idea. Moreover, a sense of civic pride is instilled when leaders are able to secure financing for neighborhood beautification projects.

The need for such programs is great. That the humanities are underappreciated in society and in academia cannot be doubted. To see this, one need only look at the relatively elegant homes of the more *useful* fields in universities across the land and compare them with the humanities' humble abodes. This is unfair, of course, but it also represents a deeply flawed method of assessing value. Some majors are considered profitable, while others are not. The lesser value ascribed to the humanities cannot help but trickle into the classroom and influence students' perceptions of their hardworking professors.

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That is not to say that we do not share some of the blame. Many English departments have been rather parsimonious over the last decade, relying on marginally attached educators, who are already packing their bags by November, to carry much of the teaching load. When we consider the benefits a long-term, reliable presence brings to a university program of study, we can begin to assess the true cost of these arrangements. While a well-rounded humanities education is, in many respects, invaluable, if we fail to demonstrate that we believe it, we cannot realistically expect others to either. Although I speak solely for myself and represent a clear minority of one, I am certain that there are others who recognize the pitfalls of the road we are on. The underlying irony is that those who benefit most tangibly from the humanities are those least likely to study them. That is to say, when the humanities enrich a city with culture, it is the builders, lenders, and real estate agents who prosper the most.

I would not go so far as to agree with Sommer's assertion that art exists merely to disturb existing arrangements. While it is often used to express alternative viewpoints, it can also be a celebration of life, among other things. It's better for us that this is so. It is unlikely that a call to protest will compel communities to finally

support the arts in a robust way. Instead, the general public is more likely to respond to an invitation to the celebration, whatever form that may take.

How should, or could, we measure the achievements of humanist scholars who elevate the quality of the communities they inhabit? Empirical evidence will help us track our success and provide a means to communicate that success to the outside world. Undoubtedly, statistical evidence can be found in many places. Yet, we should remember that the lack of enthusiasm for the humanities we observe in those outside our discipline is due to a combination of several deeply entrenched factors, and presenting quantitative evidence for success may move the needle less than we hope. There are many known facts in the world, and, as we observe, the mere knowledge of them isn't always enough to inspire action. Nevertheless, it won't do any harm to try. If we, collectively, agree on this matter, a new question immediately arises: What other strategies might we try concurrently with an experiential approach in order to achieve our common goals and to promote a more thoughtful, creative, and inspiring world?

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