Any Way the Wind Blows: Changing Dynamics in American Arts Policy

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[The] dialogue between research and policy in the cultural field is still . . . sotto voce. It needs to become louder, more public, more robust and more confident. (Mercer 2002)

In March 2005, the RAND Corporation released a report called Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate on the Benefits of the Arts (McCarthy et al. 2005). Its defense of the arts is especially welcome given the dim view often taken by mainstream media that the arts are anything other than pastime, entertainment, or a drain on taxpayer dollars. The report takes to task a number of popular claims linking exposure to the arts to a host of benefits ranging from improved educational skills among children, to benefits for local, state, and national economies. A primary conclusion of the report is that arts advocacy requires a new language; for those advocating the arts to win, the debate on the benefit of the arts must be significantly reframed. However, the RAND report does not do this; rather, it perpetuates a number of problems with the debate in general and introduces a few of its own. Most important, it contributes to the fragmentation of the fields of arts policy and arts management, misrepresents the direction and scope of some of the research in the area of the benefits of the arts, and ultimately undermines the credibility of the arts community in an already highly charged policy area. Although this article takes Gifts of

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the Muse to task, it is also directed to practitioners of arts policy and arts management to take a more critical approach in policy debate and in adopting new policy strategies and positions. It argues that changes in policy direction will be ineffective and incomplete, and possibly both, if they do not take into account a range of issues, including philosophical problems, practical questions of policy, and problems that relate to the development of arts policy as a field. They are the very problems that, when left unsolved, made it easy for arts advocates to discard the language of “intrinsic value” in the past and to adopt the present day language of “instrumental value” instead.

Fragmentation has traditionally characterized the arts community. As a result, there often seems to be little knowledge of the history of arts policy and advocacy, even among many practitioners. The arts community is vulnerable to ever-changing winds of the political environment, responding, and often failing to lead in setting policy directions. The consequence, for either increased or continued interest in supporting the arts on the part of government or the general public, is that the arts community will lose whatever legitimacy and leadership advantages it currently enjoys.

Gifts of the Muse is a meta-analysis of studies that purport to show the cognitive, attitudinal and behavioral, health, social, or economic benefits of the arts. The authors find that evidence linking the arts to these benefits is weak and many of the studies are flawed. They recommend that, rather than claiming instrumental benefits of exposure to the arts, policy advocates should argue for the intrinsic value instead. The goal of the study is “to improve the current understanding of the arts’ full range of effects in order to inform public debate and policy” (McCarthy et al. 2005, xviii).

Although more conversation is beneficial in a general way—keeping the issue of the arts and their value in the public discourse—the communities most interested in the direction of arts policy should use the opportunity to reflect in more focused ways on the issues raised and their implications for future policy strategies. More important, they should reflect on the future of the arts community and the role it will play—either as a leader in the arts policy debate or as the partisan follower of directions set by others—with important implications for the future of the arts in the United States.

Intrinsic versus Instrumental

The arts are undervalued in the United States. Until recently, the remedy was to publicize their measurable, instrumental benefits so that legislators and the public, convinced of their value, would support increases in public funding. Now, however, a number of critiques suggest that studies cannot legitimately establish a link between exposure to the arts and the beneficial outcome.¹ So, the authors of the RAND report conclude, we must develop a new
language of arts advocacy, one based on intrinsic rather than instrumental value (McCarthy et al. 2005, xviii).

What does it mean, in practical terms, to make such a substitution? It is more than simply adopting new arguments and new ways of speaking. In fact, developing the language, itself, depending on how we conceive it, may not be such a problem. There is precedence after all. Many in the business of arts policy, advocacy, or management may recognize the language of intrinsic value as part of an earlier paradigm—deeply rooted in the nineteenth- and twentieth-century thinking of theorists such as Burke, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and other moderns with even deeper roots in classical and ancient philosophies. It is a language game with which the arts community is well familiar: extolling the ineffable virtue of the arts in making humans better than they are and allowing us to experience the transcendent and even the divine.

Such appeals were deeply meaningful in an earlier era, even as late as the mid-twentieth century, comprising much of the persuasive speech that went into convincing policymakers to create the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1965. Michael Brenson notes that in arguing for the Endowment, both President Kennedy and members of Congress “were more comfortable with the belief that art was ennobling and transcendent” (2001, 21). More recently, however, the dominant view in the arts community is that such appeals have lost their force, and thus the arts community speaks the language of economic impact, accountability, and measurable gains. However, the language of instrumental value seems to leave a bad taste in our mouths. We would rather talk about the “magic” of the arts, as Livingstone Biddle once put it (1988, 5). But we are afraid that such language sounds quaint, or worse, flaky and unscientific. Worse yet, who—we have wondered in the recent past—will listen?

According to Gifts of the Muse coauthor Laura Zakaras, the arts are valuable because they give us pleasure, captivate us, engender a sense of wonder in us, give us a greater capacity for empathy, and put us in touch with our very humanity (Zakaras 2005). However, the RAND report tells us nothing new concerning intrinsic values; instead, its merit is in raising opportunities for a discussion we cannot have too often—that is, understanding the role of the arts in human society and in the life of individuals. If the appearance of this report prompts such a discussion—and it has—it is a good thing. It has been the subject of discussion on Web logs, arts policy and arts management listservs, and even in mainstream media coverage, the latter happily demonstrating more widespread interest than in the arts community alone.

The arts community, of course, recognizes the potential impact for ways of doing business: convincing people to support the arts because it benefits the economy or kids is inherently an easier sell. Arguments based on the intrinsic value of the arts require some higher level of strategy if they are to be suc-
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Successful. The new language suggested by the RAND report, however, must take into account the philosophical problems it raises, the practical questions of policy that it fails to solve, and the problems it poses for the development of arts policy as a field. If such issues are not taken into account, no reframing of the debate can hope to bring about the kinds of changes envisioned in the report.

The Language of Accountability

To counter the fallout from the “culture wars” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the arts community responded, in part, by adopting the language of accountability. Lawmakers were unmoved, it seemed, by claims that the arts should be protected (and funded) for their intrinsic value. A shift toward presenting the arts as productive—adding measurable value to society—to counter an erroneous image of the arts as idle recipient of government largesse was prompted by powerful political winds that threatened to take the NEA down, and, no doubt, many other arts organizations with it. In the context of recommendations made in *Gifts of the Muse*, it is important to recognize this historical shift. Americans for the Arts president Robert Lynch explains that a significant reason behind changes in policy strategy was that “legislators didn’t care” (DeVereaux 2003, 187). That is, they did not care until the arts community presented documentation of instrumental benefits, especially in terms of the economic impact of the arts. Lynch credits changes in policy strategy for increases in support for the arts, and in particular, increased NEA appropriations beginning in 2001.

Not all economic impact studies are equal, however, and whatever real merit is found in some reports, *Gifts of the Muse* reveals flaws in other empirically based studies. The authors demonstrate that, among other limitations, much of the research on educational or health benefits only qualifies as case studies, making it problematic to extrapolate to general populations. Others show correlation, not causality, which nonetheless, in public discourse, has often been misrepresented as causal guarantee.

Advocates, of course, have a responsibility to fully understand the evidence they cite, and part of advocacy training is to make sure that there is a clear understanding of what a study may legitimately claim. Apart from the purely ethical problem of misrepresenting the conclusions of a study (even if done in innocence or ignorance), a strategy that relies on mistaken claims is destined to backfire. The fact is that many grassroots advocates are familiar with the studies in question only in simplified form, generally as disseminated by professional organizations such as Americans for the Arts, or by the state arts councils, for advocacy purposes. Clearly, the transfer of information is something that the fields of policy and advocacy must address. Although the point in question is noted here only briefly, it merits much greater attention for both
ethical and professional reasons. Other concerns raised by the RAND report, however, present the need for more immediate and detailed examination.

The first of these relates to philosophical concerns. The RAND report recommends that advocates find ways to express the deeper meaning of art in communal and individual life. In an interview following publication of Gifts of the Muse, Laura Zakaras acknowledges, however, that she has no advice on how to achieve this goal (May 26, 2005). More important is that, even if citizens and lawmakers agree that the real value of the arts is intrinsic, it does not provide, in itself, an argument for any particular public policy outcome (e.g., increased funding to the arts). History shows that even when the language of intrinsic value was more common—prior to the creation of the NEA, for example—lawmakers were seldom inclined to direct public funds to support them.

In their defense, the authors of the RAND report do note that the language of intrinsic value was more widespread in the nineteenth century, neglecting, however, that it was also common in the first half of the twentieth century, especially prior to significant shifts in policy strategy following the culture wars. In any case, neither century is particularly noted in U.S. history for generous government support of the arts. In fact, if an early French traveler is to be believed, Americans found little time for “the beautiful,” preferring “the useful” instead (de Tocqueville 1901, 531). More to the point, much of the talk about art, whether rooted in intrinsic or in instrumental value, is in a language that could be described as philosophically sloppy in ways that have very real impact on the arts policy process. We need to examine, from a practical-philosophical viewpoint, how we use language, more so than what language we use. An examination of the use of words and concepts in the arts policy sphere reveals many of the same mistakes, whether we are touting instrumental or intrinsic values.

Language Problems in the Arts

Language problems are quintessential philosophical problems and the arena of the arts is rife with them. As an example, I will look at only one area of difficulty to show the problems it might entail for arts policy debate. Apart from very obvious difficulties in deciding what qualifies as art, there is the added problem that we fail to distinguish between art as an abstract concept, art as a category of objects, and art as an individual thing. The distinction is not trivial. When we use these terms in sloppy ways, it makes it difficult to discern, whether from the perspective of instrumental or intrinsic value, what kinds of conclusions we are drawing and how we expect to implement them as policy objectives.

At the most abstract level are theories of art: definitions that evoke principles having to do with the nature of art. Art in this sense is conceptual, not empirical; it is not a mere report of how art operates in the world (or how we
operate in relation to art). It is intended to give us insight and discovery and to provide us with a way of thinking about, or talking about art (Langer 1961). The connection between the concept art and objects in the world is not a necessary one.

The language of intrinsic value falls into this latter level of abstraction. When we say, for example, that art engenders wonder, or “captivation” (McCarthy et al. 2005, 45), we reveal something about the way we believe art functions in our human world. But not all examples of art engender wonder (even supposing we really understand what “engendering wonder” means in practical terms). The purpose of such abstract evocations concerning the value of the arts is to establish shared meanings that help us understand the role of the arts in human experience, but also to understand our place in the world as human beings.

At a lower level of abstraction is the category, or class, of things called “art.” The boundaries of this category are famously loose and ill-defined. The reasons for this have almost nothing to do with art and almost everything to do with people, especially artists, who generally speaking, make it their business to push those boundaries as far as they will go. The question of what does or does not belong in this category is often politically contentious. However, in looking at benefits derived from the arts, or the value that we place on art in society, the general category art is not very useful. Its purpose, metaphorically speaking, is to be a warehouse for collecting the many things to which the label applies. Things are collected into the warehouse in a process reflective of human interests that change over time. Perhaps like some real warehouses, once something is put in, it is never removed so that the kind and variety of things called art seem endless, and after a time it is difficult—maybe impossible—to trace an uninterrupted family resemblance. An effective policy could not take the entire collection into account (nor do we honestly want it to). In any case, deciding that we value the arts as a class of things does not get us off the hook for deciding which specific examples of art will be covered by public policies or will benefit from public funding.

At the lowest level of abstraction is the term art referring to the particular case—a concert, a painting, a book. But even here we encounter the problem that for many people, artists for example, art is not a product but a process that may result in a product. When we advocate for increased funding, therefore, we must be clear whether we are interested in funding the process of art creation (whether for artists or for nonartist participants) or the outcome—the products—resulting from the process. This distinction is important for several reasons.

First, without the process, there is no end result—the art piece or performance. Many people believe that supporting the arts really means affording artists the time and resources to devote to the process. This view has some support in the original text of The National Foundation on the Arts
and Humanities Act of 1965. Section 2(5), under the “Declaration of Purpose,” states:

it is necessary and appropriate for the Federal Government to help create and sustain not only a climate encouraging freedom of thought, imagination, and inquiry but also the material conditions facilitating the release of this creative talent.

The phrase “release of creative talent” seems to address the notion of process, and product is not specifically mentioned as an outcome.

Second, the distinction is important, given some of the controversies over arts funding in the past. When it was first created, the NEA provided support to artists, on the merits of past accomplishments, to continue in their creative endeavors. The terms of the original grant awards did not specify particular outcomes, yet some lawmakers displayed very public displeasure over some of the results. Two of the better-known examples of public outrage toward the NEA during the height of the culture wars concerned the works of artists Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano, whose works, in any case, were not directly funded by the NEA. Nevertheless, the homoerotic art of Mapplethorpe and the alleged blasphemy of Serrano’s Piss Christ were seen as direct outcomes of NEA funding choices.

Another early example of congressional ire concerned a best-selling novel by Erica Jong. The author received an NEA grant in 1973, prior to publication of Fear of Flying. As a grant recipient, she was required to acknowledge NEA’s support. Her printed acknowledgment appeared in the book followed by a page carrying the title of the first chapter: “En Route to the Congress of Dreams, or, The Zipless Fuck.” The juxtaposition caused some displeasure, most notably in conservative senator Jesse Helms. But, overall, the negative reaction to the book centered more on the novelist’s political and feminist views. Despite the book’s popularity with some Americans, others, joined by Helms, objected to the NEA’s association with its author.

One point to be taken from these examples is that issues of instrumental versus intrinsic value of the arts seem rather beside the point in political battles over what government should fund. An appreciation for the intrinsic value of the arts would seem to forestall the controversies noted above, and yet, they were defining incidents in American arts policy history, some of which turned the tide toward advocacy along instrumental lines. Supporters of public funding for the arts could claim, prior to the heat of the culture wars, that art did not need to justify its value or merits as something worth public support. The fact that it was art by some official measure was sufficient. The NEA correctly awarded a grant to Jong, for example, to engage in a process. The agency was then criticized over the end product.

The controversy over works such as those described above led opponents to counter that anything funded with taxpayer money had to justify its value.
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This political sidestepping avoided the thorny issue of whether something qualified as art by focusing on demands to articulate its value. One might be hard-pressed to explain the merits of art created by Gilbert and George, for example, in which human feces figures prominently. Failure to provide an instrumental value, therefore, avoids, altogether, the issue of whether something qualifies as art.

The distinctions among the uses of the word *art* are typically not apparent in discussions of arts policy where participants use the terms from the above-noted three levels of abstraction interchangeably, though they are not, in fact, interchangeable. Neither Mapplethorpe’s nor Serrano’s photographic art, nor Jong’s prose seem to have engendered wonder in, or captivated, some people; their intrinsic value, if any, may not be apparent. Nonetheless, they influenced policy, whereas art, understood at the higher level of abstractions, never can. Public debate seeks to position the arts in our lives. Nevertheless, public policies and public controversies can only address the particular, individual instances of art.

From the perspective of the analytical tradition that dominated philosophy through much of the twentieth century, we gain greatly in our understanding of the world simply by clarifying confusing words and ideas. “The best thing that philosophy can do for the art studies is to bring some clarity . . . ” (Isenberg qtd. in Silvers 1987, 137). By examining how we use words, we may also open a window into how we think about the world. But clarification of terms also helps us to avoid other kinds of sloppy thinking. We cannot avoid the problems of language in arts policy, yet we can heighten our awareness of the ways that language influences our understanding of policy positions, and we can be cognizant of the difficulties that arise whether we express ourselves in terms of instrumental or intrinsic value.

**Political and Policy Problems**

The second issue of concern has to do with policy but includes problems that are dangerously political in nature. In an interview following publication of the RAND report, Joli Jensen expresses fear—perhaps with good reason—that the report could be the catalyst for reopening the debate on popular versus privileged notions of art (2005). The language of intrinsic benefit could be seen by some decision makers as applying uniquely to Shakespeare, Monet, classical ballet, or to very popular, unchallenging, politically correct examples of art. Does sexually explicit art lift the human spirit? No? Then it should not be supported with taxpayer money, artistic merit notwithstanding. Does art critical of government policies engender a sense of wonder? No? Then it has no intrinsic value.

It is easy to see that a focus on intrinsic benefits could be used as a weapon in the continuing culture wars, privileging certain examples of art and elimi-
nating others, rewarding some artists and marginalizing those whose work does not captivate, give pleasure, or produce wonder, within the official understanding of those terms. The report could also be used in ways that work contrary to values associated with the arts that we ought to hold dear: freedom of expression or the pursuit of our own ideas of happiness and well-being. The point, of course, is that focusing on intrinsic value does not necessarily translate into more desirable policy outcomes.

One of the most important policy issues is how to go from policy goal to policy implementation. The RAND report provides a list of recommendations addressed to the arts community for redirecting the way it promotes the benefits of the arts: develop language for discussing intrinsic benefits, address the limitations of the research on instrumental benefits, promote early exposure to the arts, and create circumstances for rewarding arts experiences (McCarthy et al. 2005, 72–73). The issue of language has already been addressed. Of the remaining areas, however, it is disappointing that a report—well-researched in many other aspects—should offer a list of recommendations that provide nothing new and are so broadly stated that they are less recommendations than articulations of general values.

One clear merit of the RAND report is its detailed scrutiny of studies claiming instrumental benefits in areas such as education and economic impact. The report is only the latest example of metaresearch that finds flaws and limitations in some empirical studies or that recommends greater emphasis on the intrinsic value of the arts. As early as 1987, Bruce Seaman’s critique of economic impact studies was published as part of Economic Impact of the Arts by the National Conference of State Legislators. Seaman also presented his critique on a panel at a conference hosted by Princeton University in 2002. Another member of the panel, Ellen Winner, critiqued studies claiming educational benefits from the arts. In fall 2004, the Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society devoted an entire issue to reassessing the value of economic impact studies and to seeking better ways to convey the benefits of the arts. An Internet search turned up a number of other studies, reports, papers, and Web discussions on the subject, including one practitioner who cites Winner and Hetland, whose study concludes, some time before the release of the RAND report, that “the real challenge is to make an argument for the intrinsic value of the arts as part of the core curriculum” (Perrin 2000).

It is true that the larger arts community needs to be reminded of the limitations of many of the studies touting conclusions that the arts provide concrete, measurable benefits. It is also important to acknowledge researchers who have already identified those limitations. That such a body of literature exists, acknowledged or not by the RAND report, is evidence that the field of arts policy is more vital than Gifts of the Muse seems to credit. However, given that many readers of the report may be unfamiliar with past research or the
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history of U.S. arts policy, the failure to give credit is a compromising omission. The arts community suffered a crisis of credibility and legitimacy in the past century when advocates were criticized for policy strategies appealing to intrinsic value. In many ways, it has yet to recover lost ground. The suggestion that the arts community is wrong-headed, once again, this time for failing to recognize the intrinsic value of the arts, is patronizing at best and cruelly ironic at the worst.

In its final recommendations, the RAND report takes a surprising turn in suggesting policy strategies already well-established within the arts community. It suggests that arts organizations should promote early exposure of children to the arts. This is surprising, given the already wide acceptance that children will benefit best if their arts experiences begin early in life. That it is widely accepted is readily demonstrated by the number of organizations, including Americans for the Arts, the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, the National Endowment for the Arts, the arts councils of the fifty states and their territories, the many regional and local arts agencies, and private foundations that promote this value through programs, publications, grants, and a variety of other means.

As intuitive as it seems that early exposure leads to greater participation in adulthood, however, it is a policy position that is as deserving of scrutiny as the position that the arts have instrumental value. How good are the studies establishing that early exposure to the arts does lead to adult participation? Are they equally anecdotal, based on intuitive arguments, or case studies similar to those challenged by Gifts of the Muse? What kind of exposure in early childhood (or is it all and any exposure that counts) will lead to adult participation?

The truth is that not enough is known about the links between childhood activities and adult participation in the arts. Longitudinal studies, especially those that clearly define “exposure to the arts” and “participation,” may be able to answer these questions. In the meantime, a better recommendation might be that arts organizations should promote lifelong exposure to the arts beginning in early childhood. I recommend, therefore, more equal distribution and access in programs targeted to all age groups. Encouraging arts participation at all stages of life may encourage young people to see the arts as an adult activity that can be as valuable and pleasurable when they grow up as it is when they are children.

A concluding recommendation of the RAND report is that the arts community work on creating circumstances for rewarding arts experiences that encourage individuals to become “engaged” (McCarthy et al. 2005, 73–74) and that it concentrate on creating demand rather than supply (68). On the first point, arts organizations, as a matter of course, strive—at least by intent—to create rewarding arts experiences; it is a core mission of many, if not all, nonprofit arts organizations. The RAND report suggests, however, that organiza-
tions ought to do more. This strategy may, in fact, address the case for lifelong exposure to the arts. However, the recommendation leads to a circular problem. Although increased opportunities to experience the arts may result in amplifying individuals’ engagement, the goal cannot be accomplished without adequate funding. But, because organizations are to focus on demand and not supply, one wonders how demand will increase if individuals do not achieve an adequate degree of engagement. Some level of supply must precede demand, because, according to the report, it is through exposure to the arts that an individual’s desire for additional exposure is aroused (70).

Finally, there is the issue of arts policy as a field and its relationship to advocacy efforts. The question here concerns who frames the debate and how it is framed. It has been observed that advocacy has often been the primary work of the formal field of arts policy. The problem is not so much that practitioners may favor particular policy directions, such as regular funding for the arts, but that preferences may impede the critical stance every field must have if it is to be taken seriously and without which may lead to acceptance of seemingly persuasive and popular positions that do not have the force of good research behind them.

Another disappointing aspect of the RAND report, however, is that it targets the arts advocacy community unfairly for failing to recognize the intrinsic value of the arts. It also ignores the fact that in any healthy field, there are competing paradigms, theories, methods, and models. Although one view may dominate over a period of time, it is artless to assume that other positions do not exist or are ignored by the field’s own researchers and practitioners. I have shown, in fact, that the paradigm of intrinsic value is well represented both historically and in current arts policy discussions, whereas the paradigm of instrumental value has a more recent history arising in direct response to an antagonistic policy environment of the last century.

Following the culture wars, the arts advocacy community was resoundingly criticized for its political naiveté, its inept understanding of policy processes, and its inability to formulate effective policy arguments. Lawmakers and the public deeply questioned the legitimacy of the arts community to speak about the value of the arts. This brought about significant changes in the policy environment, but many in the arts community reasoned that the change was necessary to preserve a place for the arts and for nonprofit arts organizations that are responsible for much of the arts participation that the public enjoys. With great reluctance, the language of intrinsic value was cast aside. It is ironic, and deeply troubling, therefore, that the arts community is accused of failing, once again, to fully understand the value of the arts—this time because it ignores their intrinsic value. Worse, many young leaders are not fully aware of the history of arts advocacy and policy and therefore may fail to consider whether a move toward employing intrinsic values in policy arguments is truly advisable.
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The language of intrinsic value of the arts has a long history. The manner of representing the special place the arts seem to hold in human life employs much romantic and idealistic language that places the arts in the realm of the ineffable—things we cannot express because they are beyond the capacity of poor human words. “Art is notoriously hard to talk about. It seems . . . to exist in a world of its own, beyond the reach of discourse” (Geertz, 1983, 106). It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the language that seems best to represent the value of the arts—language that attempts to recognize the essential nature of the relationship between art and human existence—is less than persuasive in the practical world of policy.

In the 1960s, we feared that the intemperance of science and technology, embodied in our fears of the cold war and the nuclear bomb, would bring about a loss of humanity. In 1965, the language of intrinsic value helped to create the NEA. Policymakers imagined a role for artists and the arts that could save us from the dark consequences that excesses in science and technology might bring. Later, the language of intrinsic value was responsible for the near undoing of the NEA, as accountability and profitability became the primary means for deciding what has value in our society. In championing the language of intrinsic value, the RAND report may signal that we are looking to the arts, once again, to redeem us.

The appearance of Gifts of the Muse offers the arts community an opportunity to engage in self-reassessment. However, reassessment does not always demand change. Although the RAND report provides a convenient and well-documented meta-analysis of studies claiming that the arts lead to instrumental benefits to individuals and society, the recommendations of the report should be considered with a view to their philosophical and political/policy implications, as well as their implications for the development of the field. If reframing the debate will bring about a positive change for the arts and for society, as the RAND report suggests, the arts community will lose a place at the forefront of change if it allows others to tell its history and define the role it will play.

NOTES


REFERENCES


