

What Is the Civic Mission...of Museums?

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“The overall goal of civic education should be to help young people acquire and learn to use the skills, knowledge and attitudes that will prepare them to be competent and responsible citizens throughout their lives.”

The Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) made this declaration in an aptly-named 2003 report, *The Civic Mission of Schools*.¹ Research conducted by Carnegie in the years preceding the report’s publication indicated that “for decades, civic education curricula...had received decreasing amounts of time, money and attention while schools focused on preparing students for employment or for tests of academic progress.”² Today, this disconcerting trend continues. In March, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan cited a study which found that 70% of high school social studies teachers believe their classes are a lower priority because of “pressure to show progress on statewide math and language arts tests.” According to that same study, 45% of those teachers say the social studies curriculum at their school has been “deemphasized” as a result of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.³ In 2007, federal spending on civic education per K-12 student, per year, was \$0.50; \$2.44 per student was allocated to the study of history. By contrast, \$25.64 was dedicated to reading, while \$19.45 was spent on curriculum related to science, technology, engineering and math (STEM).⁴ This year, the federal government zeroed out its civics education budget by defunding the Center for Civic Education, whose principal source of support had been the U.S. Department of Education.

The McCormick Foundation, through its work at the state level with the Illinois Civic Mission of Schools, is just one of many organizations that are striving to reverse this trend and restore our nation’s schools to their original, civic purpose. Yet the question must be asked: Even if efforts to restore this mission are successful, should schools be single-handedly or even primarily responsible for preparing young people to become competent and responsible citizens? With funding for civic education in peril and teachers continually compelled to “teach to the test”—a test which, by and large, does not assess student learning in civics—what role can other institutions play?

More specifically, what role can and should our *museums* play in fostering a young person’s civic learning, and in cultivating the sense of social connectedness and cohesion upon which lifelong civic engagement is predicated? Families, religious institutions, and voluntary associations are often cited as contributory if not requisite factors in catalyzing civic participation. Yet museums, once perceived strictly as stodgy repositories of knowledge where silence and decorum were prized above all else, have evolved into lively forums for civic dialogue where learning is social, contextual, and co-constructed. Museums, according to the president of the Missouri History Museum, Robert R. Archibald, have eschewed their traditional roles “in favor of new responsibilities as both resources and facilitators of dialogue about those things that matter most to people.”⁵ Christopher T. Gates, executive director of Philanthropy for Active Civic Engagement (PACE), adds that “by providing the means to preserve memory, sustain culture, and create identity, museums help equip us

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to understand each other and ourselves. And it is this understanding that animates our efforts to strengthen democracy, promote civic engagement, and build community.”⁶

In order for museums to realize their potential in this regard, they must continuously work to earn the trust of younger visitors. A 2008 study by the Institute of Museum and Library Services found that adults of all ages and levels of education rate the trustworthiness of libraries and museums higher than many other sources of information.⁷ The experiences that visitors have at museums during their youth will, to a significant degree, determine the extent to which they will trust museums as reliable sources of information as adults. Moreover, and just as importantly, museums must earn a reputation as welcoming, inclusive spaces where young people can feel safe sharing their perspectives on a variety of issues, no matter how contentious, that impact their lives and communities. Again, it is these formative experiences that will determine whether a young person comes to perceive museums as trusted community resources for lifelong learning, as well as forums where they can meet with others to address issues of public concern.

Numerous museums are already creating the space for young visitors to explore issue-focused exhibits and engage in the meaningful civic dialogue they can inspire. The Jane Addams Hull-House Museum, once a settlement house on Chicago’s west side, depicts the site’s history as a center of civic life, where neighbors worked together to strengthen the community. The lives of immigrants and their families were—and continue to be—central to the Hull-House narrative. The affiliated Hull House Association, which continues Addams’ legacy in social service, works with the city’s immigrant population (among others) in an endeavor to “improve social conditions for underserved people and communities in Chicago by providing creative, innovative programs and advocating for related public policy reforms.”⁸ The museum, fittingly, addresses the historic and contemporary significance of this local population, as well as the broader narrative of immigration rights and policy reform in the United States. These subjects figure prominently into guided tours for student groups. Moreover, high school teachers have the option of scheduling a staff-facilitated dialogue on the topic of immigration.

The Chicago History Museum provides another example of an area institution with a demonstrated commitment to interpreting topics of critical social, political, and cultural significance. *Out in Chicago*, a temporary exhibit which opened in May 2011, chronicles the history of the city’s LGBT community, as well as the public policies, grassroots activism, and social forces that have shaped its development. The exhibit evolved out the longstanding *Out at CHM* program series, which offers participants a safe space to discuss various aspects of a LGBT history that continues to unfold into the present. *Out in Chicago*, in turn, provided the impetus behind an October youth summit that will convene students from high schools throughout the city and suburbs. Prior to the exhibit opening, museum staff consulted teachers who serve as sponsors of their schools’ gay-straight alliance to determine the programming that would be of greatest value to both them and their students. These teachers expressed an interest in connecting their students with other young people who represent a diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives. The summit will facilitate this objective and offer students a safe forum in which to discuss issues of both personal and public concern.

LGBT rights is but one of several issues addressed in the McCormick Foundation’s own Freedom Express, a traveling museum that illustrates how the First Amendment enables a healthy democracy, where we can freely exchange ideas, consider multiple perspectives, and act on issues that matter to us. Exhibits encompass an array of timely, controversial issues that are often overly polemicized in political and media rhetoric, thereby undermining the potential for meaningful and productive debate. The field trip experience allows students to debate the constitutionality of violence in video games, online hate speech, and indecency in popular music. Both museum content and programming are designed to encourage thoughtful consideration of the diverse perspectives in these debates, as well as civil, civic dialogue. This sort of engagement finds support in the aforementioned *Civic Mission of Schools* report, which outlines six promising, research-based approaches to promoting competent and responsible citizenship in *formal* education. One of the approaches asserts the effectiveness of classroom discussion centered on current events and issues, particularly those that students

perceive as relating to their own lives.⁹ While this sort of conversation typically occurs during a visit between students, teachers and museum staff, exhibit content and related resources facilitate the continuation of this dialogue. Moreover, through professional development offerings and grantmaking, the Foundation helps teachers hone their skills in facilitating discussions of current and controversial issues back in the classroom.

What role should museums play in fostering civic learning?

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While schools are uniquely equipped and positioned to promote the sort of learning that is requisite to sustained civic engagement, they need not—and indeed should not—pursue this endeavor single-handedly. Through mutually supportive practice, schools and museums can work in concert with one another to foster the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that underpin widespread participation in public life and, ultimately, a thriving democracy.

¹ Carnegie Corporation of New York and CIRCLE: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, *The Civic Mission of Schools* (2003), published online at www.civicmissionofschools.org/site/campaign/documents/CivicMissionofSchools.pdf, 10.

² Carnegie Corporation of New York, *Carnegie Review: A New Civic Mission of Schools* (Spring 2011), published online at www.carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/civic_mission_of_schools_2011.pdf, 4-5.

³ American Enterprise Institute Program on American Citizenship, *High Schools, Civics, and Citizenship: What Social Studies Teachers Think and Do* (September 2010), published online at www.aei.org/docLib/High-Schools-Civics-Citizenship-Full-Report.pdf.

⁴ Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, “Recommendations for the Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to Strengthen Civic Learning (June 2010),” published online at www.civicmissionofschools.org/site/documents/ESEA-JUNE2010.

⁵ Robert R. Archibald, introduction to *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums* (Washington DC: American Association of Museums, 2002), 3.

⁶ Christopher T. Gates, “The Civic Landscape” in *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, 28.

⁷ Institute of Museum and Library Services, *Interconnections: The IMLS National Study on the Use of Libraries, Museums and the Internet, Conclusions Summary* (February 2009), published online at www.interconnectionsreport.org/reports/ConclusionsSummaryFinalB.pdf, 3.

⁸ “Mission,” Jane Addams Hull House Association, accessed August 3, 2011, www.hullhouse.org/aboutus/mission.html.

⁹ *The Civic Mission of Schools*, 6. See also *Creating a Civic Blueprint for Illinois High Schools*, published by the McCormick Foundation and available online at www.mccormickfoundation.org/publications/MCCormickFoundationEducatingforDemocracy.pdf.