

THE Museum SCHOLAR

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VOLUME 1 NUMBER 1 – 2017



ISSN XXXX-XXXX

WWW.THEMUSEUMSCHOLAR.ORG

The Museum Scholar

www.themuseumscholar.org

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP
2147 S. Lumber St, Suite 419, Chicago, IL 60616
www.rogerspublishing.org

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Community Currency: End to the “Fee or Free” Debate

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Keywords museum admission; admission fee; volunteer; community

Abstract In the heated debate over museum admission fees, an alternative proposal exists to accept volunteer hours donated to other nonprofit organizations within the community as payment for museum entry. With valid arguments both in favor of retaining, and in favor of eliminating, admission fees, a different solution is needed. This proposal attempts to answer the concerns of both sides of the argument, while simultaneously building greater community integration as well.

About the Author Heather D. Martin is an experienced educator and community organizer currently completing her Master of Museum Studies through the Harvard Extension School. Martin has a passion for creating engaging interactions that inspire questions, curiosity, and bold new ideas. When not crafting curricula, Martin may often be found reading, making prints, playing board games, or stomping around the intertidal zone of coastal Maine where she lives with her family (dogs included).

This article was published on March 27, 2017 at www.themuseumscholar.org

Museums are hotbeds of debate. Questions arise around cultural appropriation, artifact repatriation, and the definition of “planet,” to name a few. Yet, one debate remains unanswered, fueling passions and igniting tempers: the question of to charge or to abolish admission fees. Researchers have conducted diverse studies, data is collected, and articles are published on this topic, but no definite conclusions have been established. The center of this argument questions whether fees create a barrier to museum access, or whether free admission diminishes a museum’s perceived or real value. The “fee or free” debate rages on.

Supporters of free entry to American museums argue that charging for admission places an unnecessary and potentially insurmountable barrier to museum entry at the door. Individuals, families, or schools with low or restricted budgets may be denied access, increasing the gap in cultural, scientific, or artistic opportunities. In addition, public, non-profit museums receive tax breaks and can receive funding through charitable giving. Therefore, advocates of free museum admission argue that Americans have already “paid” their fair share by permitting museums to reduce their tax burden, hence admission to these communally held assets maintained on behalf of the public trust should be free.¹

On the other side of the argument refer to studies indicating that the perception an object or experience’s worth or value is subconsciously and directly tied to its financial cost. For example, numerous studies show that individuals consistently rate their enjoyment of a wine as greater when told it is more expensive, even if the wine is presented in a glass marked with a lower price.² Other studies fail to link free museum access with an increase in museum

attendance. They show instead a marked decrease in visitor numbers for institutions that have removed admission fees.³

There is no “win” in this theoretical tug of war. Both sides are correct. Divided as they are in their approach, both sides of the admission fee issue seek the same goal: to increase public use of these institutions. It is possible to set aside this “either/or” argument and look for an alternative solution that addresses the end goal, ideally while strengthening museums’ core purposes at the same time.

“Community Currency” is a construct wherein the museum (or any institution) would accept time and effort given to other community-based nonprofit agencies as payment. Admission fees would remain in effect and individual museums would set their entrance fee as appropriate. This fee, however, could be paid in cash or in credits earned through volunteer service to other nonprofit or charitable agencies serving the community—admission via cash or volunteering.

Volunteering is long established as an antidote to loneliness and isolation, and “a growing body of evidence suggests that people who give their time to others might also be rewarded with better physical health – including lower blood pressure and a longer lifespan.”⁴ While evidence exists that the health benefits of volunteering are tied to motivation, with a marked decrease in positive effect when altruistic motivation is absent from volunteering, this link is questioned, and certain health benefits appear tied to the act itself.⁵ “Older adults who began tutoring children...demonstrated improvements in stamina, memory, and flexibility, as well as levels of depression.”⁶ While often conceived of and studied as an activity for older adults, demographic statistics throughout the U.S. show a balanced age distribution with the highest levels of volunteerism at 11% for those age 35 – 44, and the lowest volunteerism rate at 6% for those age 20 – 24.⁷ The benefits of volunteering apply regardless of age. “When Canadian tenth-graders...began volunteering...the high-schoolers lost weight and had improved cholesterol profiles compared to their non-volunteering peers.”⁸

Numerous studies highlight the positive effects on society when individuals give their time. “Helping and other prosocial activities promote smooth social functioning and encourage social harmony.”⁹ Studies in the United Kingdom found that “People living in areas where many citizens gave up their time for others enjoyed better health, suffered less crime, and claimed to be ‘very satisfied’ with their lives. Students from these communities also achieved higher GCSE grades.”¹⁰ In addition, “Volunteering had a positive influence irrespective of a community’s social class or wealth.”¹¹ The rate of U.S. residents who volunteer rises from 24.9% to 62.5% when the definition is expanded to include “informal volunteering,” such as checking in on a neighbor.¹²

While volunteering rates vary from U.S. state to state, nationally, the 24.9% of U.S. residents who volunteers contribute 7.9 billion hours of volunteer labor, valued at \$184 billion U.S. dollars.¹³ Volunteer rates “are either stable or rising”¹⁴ according to a 2017 review, and anecdotal evidence points to sharp increases in volunteer involvement post-2017 U.S. presidential inauguration.

Working within Community Currency, diverse nonprofits would be designated as partner organizations denoting the role they play in strengthening the community. If a nonprofit agrees to partner, then hours that volunteers donate at each nonprofit organization will be tracked for the sponsoring museum as credits toward visiting the museum for free, or gifting to another person. While this represents a potential loss in revenue for the museum, the importance of admission fees to the overall budget is relatively small for many organizations.¹⁵ The portion of admission fees paid for through volunteer hours might well represent admissions which would otherwise have not been seen (i.e. the visitor might not have visited at all if cash were required). Potential revenue loss may offset by earned media, increased awareness, and marketing through the Community Currency program and the attendant outreach.

Logistical and administrative concerns present a challenge both in technology and staff time for both the museum and the partner institution. They must agree on a system that tracks the hours, makes the data accessible, and requires little time or oversight. Technology is here to help. Hours, translated into “credits” can be tracked a number of ways: as an app on a smartphone, added to a magnetic strip card, similar to a credit card, or via a basic online database with access shared among institutions. Several “freeware” services, intended as online employee shift management services, already exist online and could be reconfigured for this purpose. For those leery of technology, paper vouchers could suffice.

Within the Community Currency system, a retired individual with available time but limited funds could volunteer an hour or two per week at the local library or food pantry, and subsequently take her- or himself to visit a new exhibition for free, or gift the credits to family members, or gift the credits back to the library to be offered to other patrons. A family could volunteer as a group at an animal shelter, then treat themselves to a day at the science museum. A student could volunteer and donate the credits to a general fund that would be distributed to senior citizens with limited mobility and social interaction. The permutations are limitless, and the possibilities intriguing.

Community Currency holds the promise of navigating the turbulent waters between “free or fee” by presenting an alternative construct of value and payment. Nonprofit organizations that partner with museums in this venture gain from increased awareness, and potentially increased volunteerism. Individuals who participate in the program have the potential to make new connections and to have increased access to museums, which would expand their social, experiential, and intellectual experiences. Through recognizing the value of donated time to other community organizations, the museum gains new awareness from populations that might not have otherwise visited. Perhaps most importantly, the museum would be living its mission of service to the community in a dynamic and enlivening new way, helping to create more engaged, vibrant and interconnected communities.

Notes

¹ Christopher Knight, "Museum Admission Should Be Free," *Los Angeles Times*, December 19, 2014, accessed February 23, 2017.

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- ² Victoria Ward, "People Rate Wine Better If They Are Told It Is Expensive," *The Telegraph*, April 30, 2015, accessed February 23, 2017.
- ³ Laura C. Mallonee, "Looking at the Data Behind Free Museum Admission," *Hyperallergic*, August 20, 2015, accessed February 23, 2017.
- ⁴ Stephanie Watson, "Volunteering May Be Good for Body and Mind," *Harvard Health Blog*, October 29, 2015, accessed February 24, 2017.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ James Hamblin, "The Physiological Power of Altruism," *The Atlantic*, December 30, 2015, accessed February 24, 2017.
- ⁷ "National," *Corporation for National and Community Service*, accessed February 25, 2017.
- ⁸ Hamblin, "The Physiological Power."
- ⁹ E. Gil Clary, "The Motivations to Volunteer: Theoretical and Practical Considerations," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 8.5 (1999): 158.
- ¹⁰ "Volunteering 'boosts Community Happiness,'" *The Guardian*, September 20, 2004, accessed February 24, 2017.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² "National," *Corporation for National and Community Service*.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ John Wilson, "Volunteering," *Annual Review of Sociology* No. 26 (2000): 217.
- ¹⁵ "Should Museums Offer Free Admission to Everyone?" *The Boston Globe*, November 23, 2015, accessed February 23, 2017.

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