



From Exclusion to Inclusion: Connecting Black Students to Art Museums

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From Exclusion to Inclusion: Connecting Black Students to Art Museums

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A Capstone in the Field of Museum Studies
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts

Harvard University

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Introduction: The Case for Including Black Students in Art Museums

Art museums are important because they make culture available to everyone and they preserve historical artifacts. They are also powerful educational tools. Unfortunately, museums in America have a long history of barring entry to minorities, especially African Americans. In 2005, Lonnie Bunch, founding director of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, literally had to break into the office with a crow bar (Cunningham).

Even the museums that put together extraordinary shows seem to miss out on attracting the black audience. A perfect example is the Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition, *Andy Warhol – From A to B and Back Again*, that ended on March 31, 2019. In his review, the acclaimed *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter described Warhol as “the most important American artist of the second half of the 20th century”. While the *New York Times*, *Artforum*, and other lauded news channels rushed to critique Donna De Salvo’s curatorial exploration of Warhol’s body of work, one thing is certain: Andy Warhol remains king of post-war contemporary art (Cotter; Crow). His body of work spans four decades and includes thousands of paintings, drawings, prints, illustrations, and films.

The Warhol show included works rarely seen outside of institutions that own them, such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and the Art Institute of Chicago. Meanwhile, merely a few feet away from the Whitney Warhol show hung the work of a gifted graduate of Yale University’s MFA program, Kevin Beasley. His work is not only important to the black community, but it occupied precious museum real estate simultaneously during the Warhol show. Another *New York Times* art critic wrote, “Mr. Beasley said that because he is a black artist using cotton as a subject, his work inevitably touches on race and slavery” (Loos).

Unfortunately, however, these shows shared more than just the same museum space: they lacked a substantial black audience. As Warhol himself once said, “They always say time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself” (111). The fact remains that art museums are not succeeding in enticing more black people into their institutions and need to be more inclusive.

There is a larger issue in art museums that resonates with the current trend of inclusion. The missing black student becomes the missing black adult audience. Today, some cultural institutions, guilty of past exclusion, are developing inclusion plans to change this paradigm. These organizations seek to right the exclusionary practices that existed for decades, if not centuries. A large number of major art museums have strong K-12 programs geared to shape the future of their audience. The museums with successful K-12 programs include pedagogical methods that instruct students on how to absorb art. These pedagogical methods, such as Visual Thinking Strategies, not only enhance critical thinking skills, but also involve exposure to art museums, which improves valuable social capital. Art museums need to find new ways to connect more black students to art.

There are a couple of programs that do a good job connecting students to their museums. The two case studies in this capstone include Room to Rise and Thinking Through Art (Linzer, Danielle et al.; “Thinking Through Art”). Room to Rise, anchored by the Whitney, includes three other museums in the program—the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum facilitates the program called Thinking Through Art. Each program offers a structured learning environment for students to take advantage of the rich heritage of these

institutions. Such programs, like many of the others, include a plethora of family events and group tours.

Regrettably, these partnership programs often lack initiatives that explicitly implement measures to ensure larger participation by black students. In many cases there are no statistics related to their diversity numbers. Furthermore, art museums have yet to figure out how to make their buildings places that welcome black adults. Many scholars like Brian Kisida and Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell have written about the exclusion of African Americans in art museums. Even today the numbers are still daunting (Kisida et al.; Bridwell-Mitchell).

The Imbalance of Power

Instances of these exclusions include museum leaders as gatekeepers, museum curators as storytellers, museum visitors as patrons, and K-12 students as future candidates for all those positions. Meanwhile, the financial resources afforded to museums are extraordinary. For example, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City boasts over five thousand years of world culture, almost five million annual visitors, and over thirty annual curated exhibitions (“About the Met”). These thirty plus annual exhibitions represent the power of museums to create narratives for attendees to learn about the histories of hundreds of other cultures. This includes the African diaspora and African American culture. Often the stories representing the history of these cultures at some museums are misrepresented, or never exhibited at all.

Many suspect the absence of African-American culture in museums is due to the underrepresentation and lack of diversity in leadership at these institutions. A survey conducted by *ArtNews* showed that in 2018, “men of color occupy four percent of leadership positions, while fifty-six percent of these jobs are held by white women” (Selvin). Currently, there is an

enormous imbalance of power in art museums. For example, African Americans hold only four percent of leadership positions in U.S. art museums, yet they make up almost fourteen percent of the population (American Alliance of Museums). The attendance numbers at museums are equally discouraging. Not only are African Americans making up less than nine percent of museum attendance, but they are also less likely to participate in school partnership programs (Jennings and Jones-Rizzi; Bridwell-Mitchell). At the same time, scholars like Harvard University's Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell have insisted that school partnerships are important sources of social capital (1221). These networks of relationships between schools and elite institutions, such as art museums, create lifelong unwritten rules of entitlement and privilege for children as they navigate school, college, and finally the workplace. As researchers from the New England Museum Association wrote, "Museums at *worst* are reminders of power and privilege, tangible just moments after stepping into the lobby" (Jennings and Jones-Rizzi).

Besides all this, scholars conclude that exposure to art museums brings many educational benefits to children at all age levels. Brian Kisida, a University of Missouri professor, has spent the last decade studying the effects art has on early childhood education. Kisida argues that a critical challenge to national acceptance is the lack of empirical evidence supporting the educational value (Kisida and Bowen). Additionally, Kisida and a group of researchers determined that there is a relationship between high levels of arts-rich school experiences and higher writing and science scores, higher grade point averages, and higher levels of college attendance and graduation (Kisida et al. 198). Unfortunately for African Americans, they are far less likely to reap the educational rewards of these relationships with museums. Money is only one factor in this disproportionate alliance. Additionally, "parents lacking in resources, including social and cultural capital, are less able to provide these experiences for their children," and

generational wealth makes all the difference (Kisida et al. 197). To take out the generational wealth factor, there is an increasingly greater need for school/museum partnership programs to connect black students to these extraordinary networks.

Money is of course a key factor in access to networks. As the African American population continues to increase, its position in the middle-class diminishes. Princeton University professor Dalton Conley says, “the wealth of a child’s family is the single greatest predictor of that child’s future economic prospects” (Holland). Conley concluded that, “even white households hovering around the poverty line have a net worth of \$10,000 to \$15,000, but the typical black family at that income level will often be under water, with a negative net worth” (Holland). Numbers such as these prove there is still only a small number of African Americans to have made it into the American middle-class. These select few have been able to join these elite networks like those that control nonprofits and art museums. According to the United States Census Bureau, there are about forty-five million African Americans in the country. This figure is expected to climb steadily over the next forty to fifty years.

African Americans are also slowly increasing their power to voice opinions, by way of charitable donations. For example, President Obama’s fundraising team consisted of more African Americans who made large donations than any other Presidential bid in history. In fact, fifty-seven members of Obama’s national finance committee were black, and each member collected at least \$250,000, a formidable task that typically requires deep business networks, something relatively few blacks have had access to until fairly recently (Luo). Meanwhile, donations by blacks to nonprofits and museums are also on the rise. The National Museum of African American History & Culture noted that of its founding patrons African Americans represented seventy-four percent of the individuals who gave one million or more, which

doubled expectations (Jones). If museums are going to last through the twenty-first century and beyond, it is critical that they reflect the diversity of the world outside their doors (Bates).

Although some of these numbers may seem promising, they are still minor in the context of the museum world's entire ecosystem.

Still, the case remains that “Museums are microcosms of the world around us, ecosystems with their own governments, caste systems, policies and practices that mirror much of our society at large” (Jennings and Jones-Rizzi). School partnership programs have historically been the gateway to museums. Danielle Linzer, museum educator and Room to Rise project director, pointed out that, since the 1990s, intensive programs geared to adolescent audiences have sprung up in museums across the country, welcoming teens to explore the possibilities of collaborative work, peer engagement, experiences with art, and interaction with artists. Programs like Room to Rise helped teens in four major U.S. cities gain access to prominent art institutions like the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Walker Art Center, the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (MOCA).

Another program at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston invites children as early as elementary school to participate in a multi-year multi-visit partnership program heavily focusing on research-based educational tools like Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS). As more research supports the importance of art-based learning, it becomes a pivotal component in understanding how to improve academic achievement in underperforming communities such as African American school districts. Previous programs at art museums designed to engage with inner-city children suggest that early exposure and multiple visits over time improves critical thinking and student engagement (Kisida et al. 198); therefore, it follows that early ongoing

intensive exposure to art museums in black communities would help improve academic achievement.

Other studies show that even programs focused on single visits to museums have a great effect on children. The single visit approach requires less time, money, and special training. Randi Korn and Associates conducted a study on how a single-visit program affects children in grades 4-6. Though short in duration, facilitated single visit programs transform students in complex, multi-dimensional ways, increasing creative thinking, critical thinking, sensorial and affective responses, human connections, and academic connections (Randi Korn and Associates).

The results were stunning. Students involved in the program showed signs of improvement in many categories, including critical thinking, but also a connection with the physicality of the art. While this capstone focuses on the benefits of intensive exposure to art museums, the Randi Korn and Associates report proves that even minimal exposure, when coupled with structured pedagogical training, has similar results. Even using this less intensive approach, there are few programs connecting black students to art museums.

Muted Voices, Social Capital and Seeing Art

Oppression

Oppression in the museum world can be described as, “the complex—and too often unacknowledged—ways in which systemic structural norms influence decision making so that cultural institutions present themselves in ways that are unacceptable and exclusionary to many” (Jennings and Jones-Rizzi). From the moment a visitor walks into a major art museum anywhere in the U.S., it is apparent who belongs in the institution. Prominently placed in the lobby is a list of their donors and board of directors. These donors are the elite group of financial benefactors

who buy their way onto boards and committees to become decision makers inside the institution. For example, David Geffen, film and music producer, personally funded one fourth of New York's Museum of Modern Art \$400 million expansion expected to be completed in 2020 (Buffenstein). According to a survey conducted by the American Alliance of Museums, ninety-three percent of museum directors are white, as are ninety-two percent of board chairs and eighty-nine percent of board members (McCambridge). This means that most of the major decisions at museums will be determined by a group not likely to have had diverse experiences. To minorities who visit museums, the feeling of exclusion may persist because of the museums' lack of diversity.

The lack of diversity in leadership is also reflected in the staff at most art museums. According to a similar survey by the Andrew W. Mellon foundation, eighty-four percent of the country's museum staff (curators, educators, conservators, and upper-level administrators) was non-Hispanic white, with just four percent for blacks (Bates). Black children visiting museums in school programs may find it difficult to relate to an environment lacking in cultural diversity. Additionally, white children grow up with an understanding, even if not formally verbalized, that this space is meant for them. Ken Chen, who was the editor at *Arts and Letters Daily* during his time at Berkley, discusses ethnicity as counterculture. Chen describes counterculture as a way of life, explaining that one may find it difficult to incorporate other cultures within its own. Chen determines that racial counterculture will necessarily become a target onto which the white center will project its racial fantasies (18). These fantasies can be the fascination of talking with the one and only black person present in a white space. Chen reminds us that "many people of color have probably had the experience of being one of the only non-white persons in a room" (19). Experiences like this will confuse black children who enter a museum, rarely seeing other

African Americans. Additionally, white children, who rarely see other black children, black museum staff or motifs of black culture, will get used to the lack of diversity.

Furthermore, storytellers and curators rarely represent the diversity of the community. For example, there has been much debate regarding the recent controversy concerning curatorial appointments at major museums like the Brooklyn Museum. Many in the African American community are concerned that others are given the task of depicting their stories and choosing which paintings, drawings, sculptures, and videos will hold real estate in exhibitions. A common misconception is the challenges students from economically disadvantaged communities face in their quest to pursue career paths like that of an art historian. This field, like many liberal arts areas, is plagued with high barriers to entry and is known for its systematically low wages. Blacks highly interested in fields like art history have been reminded repeatedly that fields like this are only meant for the economically advantaged: whites. Meanwhile, as fewer art history programs admit black students, the devastating result of all this inequity is that more museums will continue to function as they always have (Rodney). Tracy Jan, writer for the *Washington Post*, noted in 2016 that white families had a median net worth of \$171,000, compared with \$17,600 for blacks. This income disparity leaves little cushion to go into a traditionally low wage-earning intellectual field like art history. Regrettably, this leaves African Americans in many aspect of art museums having their voices muted.

The Muted Voice

Museums are our stewards of culture and history. As such, they determine how stories are absorbed by viewers. Karen Bates, writer for *National Public Radio*, interviewed a Harvard University and Yale University educated black professor of art history, Steven Nelson, regarding

who controls the voice of African diaspora art. Nelson explained, “Despite the public assumption that most African art curators in the U.S. are of African descent, in the United States, the field is largely made up of white people—and most of those people are female” (Bates). In 2018, the Brooklyn Museum came under fire for their hiring a white woman, Kristen Windmuller-Luna, as the head curator of their African Art department. Nelson concluded that “the appointment of Kristen Windmuller-Luna was business as usual” (Bates). While there are some black curators at smaller culturally specific institutions, like the Studio Museum in Harlem, other major museums like the Brooklyn Museum seemingly exclude African American curators. This scarcity of black curators influences the limited number of African American artists exhibited, which creates an imbalance of what art is shown to black students or any students.

Historically, African American artists have often been ostracized for the nature of their work. Native American artist Gerald McMaster discussed the notion of the native voice. McMaster speculated that black artists and curators are muted at museums and that often their works are not displayed, if the works are owned by the museum at all. The nature of their work and the stories that they tell are often seen as aggressive and could be a reason why curators exhibit black artists less frequently. McMaster said, “Unfortunately, these artists are often seen as agitators and not as intellectuals who ask difficult questions” (380). For example, Faith Ringgold’s, *The American People Series #20: Die*, painted in 1967, was a very controversial depiction of the 1960’s race riots (see fig. 1). In the 1960s, opportunities for black artists in the mainstream art world were close to zero (Kedmey). In the painting titled *The American People Series #8: The In Crowd*, Ringgold goes a step further. In this work, three black men stand among white men with whom they form, as the painting’s title indicates, an elite group (Kedmey). The hands of the white men are covering the mouths of the black men (see fig. 2).

This painting depicts one of the many ways that even the black intellectuals have had their voices muted.



Figure 1: Faith Ringgold, *The American People Series #20: Die*, 1967, Museum of Modern Art

Taken 8 Mar 2019 by Charles Moore



Figure 2: Faith Ringgold, *The American People Series #8: The In Crowd*

www.faithringgold.com/portfolio/the-american-people-series-8-the-in-crowd

Children who visit museums have a right to clear, accurate and accessible facts, along with the stories that accompany to such facts. Nonetheless, exhibits that describe and depict violence or graphic sexual content should be presented with warning signs. For example, the Museum of African American History & Culture tells the lost stories of violence against African Americans in this country. Parents who bring their children to this museum can decide what should be censored, as galleries are flagged with warnings about the material at the entrance. Susan Crane, history professor at University of Arizona, explains that “Public controversy over museum collections, displays, and the role of museums was not and is not confined within the discourse of intellectuals” (305). She discusses that rarely are curators or experts readily available to talk with museum-goers to give a more detailed description of exhibitions or pieces. Crane’s argument is that placing the curator at the disposal of the public could reduce these misunderstandings. During student class visits, group participants often have a museum staff member who accompanies the class to answer questions that go further than the parental chaperone’s knowledge (Crane). As stewards of our society’s culture and history, museums have an obligation to educate children and liberate the voices of all artists.

Importance of Social Capital

In her work, Susan Crane also talks about her experience reading museum guest books. Her experience led her to believe that “our museum experiences instruct us in social codes of behavior, condition a sense of cultural literacy, and instill the value of art, the past, and science”

(304). In essence, children who frequent museums encounter centuries of artifacts that help them navigate and understand what cultural literacy means. What Crane talks about is the duty of museums to get the story correct, or be on the right side of history, because their artifacts shape our understanding of the past. Being on the right side of history means giving all Americans, including African Americans, the platform to tell their stories. It means recreating the atmosphere at art museums so that they look and feel as inclusive and diverse as the United States of America itself claims to be. It also means giving equal access to increase social capital for all, including blacks in the museum network. Museums that partner with schools help to create intellectual social capital for the students that have access.

A research paper released in 2017 by Harvard University professor, Ebony Bridwell-Mitchell, investigated the importance of social capital and school partnerships. Bridwell-Mitchell stated that schools' relationships with partners are a critical source of *social capital*, meaning the potential and actual set of cognitive, social, and material resources made available through direct and indirect relationships with others. This study looked at what results come from increased social capital and what patterns were prevalent in those with access to these networks. Bridwell-Mitchell's study found a clear pattern and that the networks of teachers and school leadership determined not only the quality of these partnerships, but whether they even existed. Her study concluded that "the density of the school-partner network, meaning the overall proportion of possible relationships between schools and partners that have been realized, also might affect schools' access to social capital" (Bridwell-Mitchell). Finally, while this study does not take race into account, it discusses the economics behind those who benefit from increased social capital. Given the statistics around impoverished schools, primarily those in black communities lacking

resources, it makes sense these are the same school districts that have the misfortune of exclusion of access to art museums.

How to Increase Social Capital in Children

Social capital takes years, even decades, to acquire. First, one must understand the value of cultural networks. Only after quantifying what social capital means will those without it be able to understand the benefits. Additionally, there needs to be recognition of those who have been barred from these networks previously. According to Tina Grotzer, a cognitive scientist at Harvard's Graduate School of Education, you must have a vision of the learner. This vision includes understanding how the lack of access influence their learning ability. This becomes a challenge for an institution set in centuries of their own ways (Grotzer). According to artist and museum professional Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Museums, while repositories of tangible heritage in the form of artifact collections, have always had to address the intangible aspects of culture—indigenous knowledge, belief systems, and performance". This is why museums as cultural custodians have a responsibility to tell inclusive stories.

Ultimately, when museums and schools come together, they provide opportunities to learn and create valuable networks. Although often disadvantaged communities fail to understand the importance of art museum exposure, parents must be pushed to get more involved. Grotzer states that partnerships offer an important avenue for helping parents and the broader community support and recognize new visions for learning (7). Therefore, partner programs serving disadvantaged communities also must address what happens when the child gets home. As always, the children of parents who have the time and resources to be more involved will be at an advantage, while parents pressed for time will face additional hurdles.

Besides, despite gains in income and wealth, the economic chasm between Black families and their white counterparts widened between 2013 and 2016, even extending to Americans with comparable levels of education, according to the Federal Reserve (Jan). This income gap parallels the social capital gap. As income disparity rises, so will the difficulties in connecting black students to art museums.

How to See Art

Inclusion without spending time teaching how to see art will be counterproductive. The teachers must understand art, in turn becoming better instructors. In addition, parents and children should have some basic understanding of what they are looking at when in museums. This will increase the results when black students get connected to art museums and help to expand social capital and academic achievement. One of the most important books to learn about the history of art costs less than ten dollars. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* explains how seeing comes before words and how the child looks and recognizes before it can speak (7). This sounds a lot like Visual Thinking Strategies. Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) was developed by Abigail Housen, a Harvard University-trained psychologist, and Philip Yenawine, a museum educator with decades of experience. Yenawine explained that when he was running education programs at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) visitors asked a lot of 'why' questions about the complex, challenging, and often strange-looking art of the past hundred years or so (1). Yenawine also noted, the goal of Visual Thinking Strategies was to seek permission to be puzzled and to think, as opposed to getting the right answers (15). It is good practice to include *Ways of Seeing* as required reading for black students so their exposure to art will have stronger results.

Books like *Ways of Seeing* will increase the results that VTS provides, helping students look at common images in art museums and have a deeper understanding. For example, Vincent Van Gogh's *Starry Nights*, located prominently in the center of the modern art wing of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City (see fig. 3), is a common motif. His interpretation of landscapes and still life are images that everyone can relate to. Artists like Van Gogh make use of common reoccurring themes that can provide culturally enriching experiences, and their ethnic background does not hinder that learning opportunity. VTS begins with the very intriguing basic question: what's happening in this picture? At first glance, a child may notice the cheerless blues and darker shades of yellows and greens. The woody perennial plants appear prominent, while the residential structures are carefully shaded by the bright rays of a quarter moon. The brush strokes fail at hiding the despair of Van Gogh. One might also notice the importance the museum places on the work by its carefully gilded frame. Berger adds that it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world; we explain that world with words, but words can never undo the fact that we are surrounded by it (7). The fact is, everyone has the ability to understand the beauty of the familiar, yet the unfamiliar can be understood with the right instruction.



Figure 3: Vincent Van Gogh. *Starry Nights*. Museum of Modern Art, New York

Taken 4 Mar 2019, by Charles Moore

Yenawine agrees, “All of us have the capacity to engage with the unfamiliar” (75). The next question of Visual Thinking Strategies asks the viewer to take the ideas they learned from looking and critically relook at the artwork and present what else they see. After interviewing hundreds of viewers, Housen decided that having viewers talk out loud, in a free-form stream of consciousness, until they had nothing more to say, allowed them to make more sense of what they were seeing (Yenawine). Ossian Ward, a prominent gallery director in New York City, took

Berger's work even further. His modernized approach is seen in *Ways of Looking*, a contemporary approach to *Ways of Seeing*. Ward proclaims that “contemporary art, like contemporary life, is now a similarly fast-moving landscape, in which artists make use of, or refer to, everything in our purview and anything else imaginable besides” (7). Visual Thinking Strategies and Ways of Seeing/Looking are methods that will help to improve access and inclusion. With VTS in particular, certain barriers are removed and allow anyone to approach the art.

All four museums organized in the Room to Rise program are gatekeepers to art of the postmodern-era, located in major cities. The purpose of programs like Room to Rise is to determine what academic benefits come from exposing teens to art museums. Yenawine and Housen's work set out to see if they could teach what came to be called *viewing skills*—observing, interpreting what one sees, probing and reflecting on first and second thoughts, considering alternative meanings, and so on (Yenawine). Often, contemporary artists use relatable images, or portrayals of popular culture figures that children can ascertain. For example, Kehinde Wiley, a 2001 Yale University MFA graduate, was commissioned to complete the presidential portrait of Barack Obama, placed at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. (see fig. 4). In this example of Wiley's distinctive portrait design, *President Barack Obama* can be seen seated on a wooden chair, arms folded, with a backdrop of foliage. At this point, strategies designed by Yenawine, Housen, Ward, and Berger allow the viewer, possibly a child, to explore the deeper meanings behind his pose, the colors and types of shrubs, and other obscure things like his suit and the carving on the chair. In essence, Visual Thinking Strategies asks students to close read or critique this image. This exercise, which consists of those three basic

questions, can be used repeatedly to build a student's critical thinking skills and ultimately has the potential to enhance their social capital.

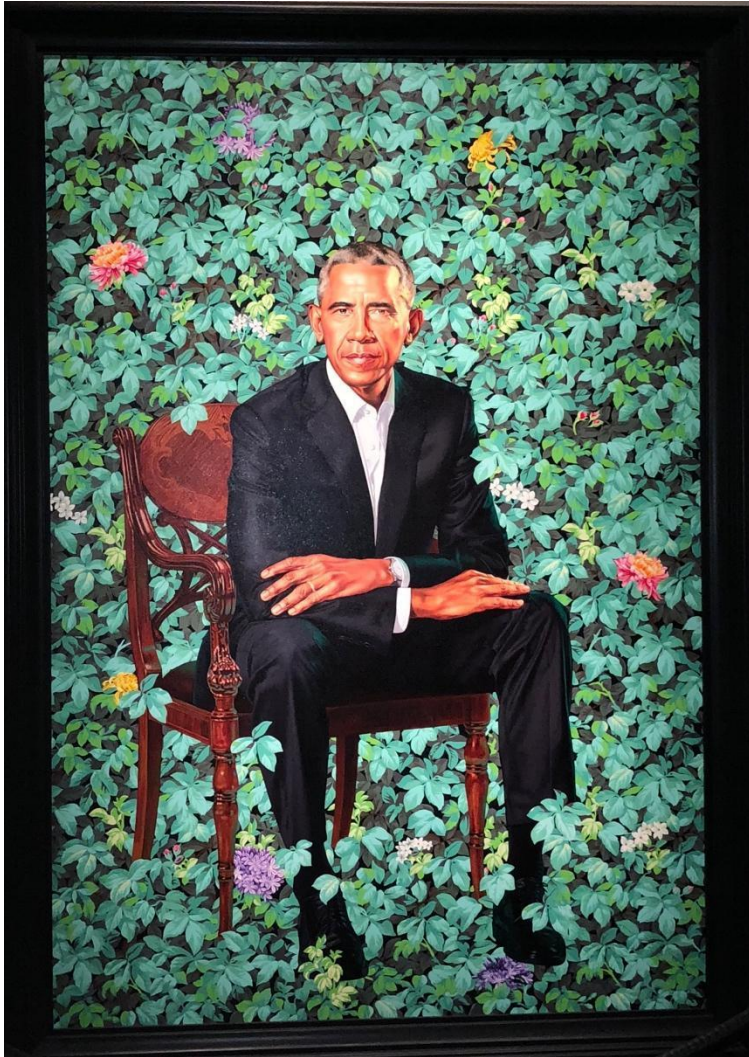


Figure 4: Kehinde Wiley. *President Barack Obama*. National Portrait Gallery, Washington D.C.

Taken 28 Mar 2018, by Charles Moore

Room to Rise: The Lasting Impact of Intensive Teen Programs in Art Museums

Background

Museums are social spaces, yet at their best they influence visitors to think critically about the objects on display. In recent years, museums have been pouring resources into creating robust education departments. Aside from examining the needs of their current base, studies have shown that nonprofits and museums are fighting to cultivate new interested visitors.

Furthermore, “related research has found that arts enrichment in preschool activities is related to school readiness skills, higher achievement, and improved vocabulary” (Kisida et al.).

Unfortunately, students without exposure to these programs earlier in their childhoods have a reduction of high school readiness. Room to Rise seeks to capture an opportunity to give these teens intensive exposure to art museums. The program results from a multi-year collaboration between the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Walker Art Center, the Contemporary Arts Museum—Houston, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (Linzer et al.).

Four Museums included in Room to Rise

The Whitney Museum of American Art is a contemporary art museum recently relocated from the upper east side of New York City to its new home downtown. The new building was designed by Italian architect, Renzo Piano. With a collection of over 23,000 pieces, the Whitney is one of largest museums in the country dedicated to contemporary art (“History of the Whitney”). The museum puts on a biennial exhibition, which began in 1973 (“Whitney Biennial 2019”). It is the longest running exhibition in the country (“Whitney Biennial 2019”) and introduces the world to highly talented but relatively unknown artists. The Whitney Museum of

American Art is the anchor of the Room to Rise program, orchestrated by the museum's Director of Access and Community Programs, Danielle Linzer.

The Museum of Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles is a contemporary art museum located in Los Angeles, California. Considered one of the finest art institutions on the west coast, it holds one of the largest collections of Robert Rauschenberg. It boasts Eli Broad, one of the country's largest collector of modern and contemporary art, as a major donor and life trustee. Its mission states: "We care for the experience of art, the inevitability of change, the multiplicity of perspectives, the urgency of contemporary expression" ("Welcome to the Museum of Contemporary Art"). The quarterly teen night opens its doors to local children with entertainment, refreshments, and an intimate unique experience in the galleries. This event, designed by participants of the teen program, draws teens from all over Los Angeles County and Southern California for a special night at the museum ("Teen Night"). Teen night is the perfect way to introduce local teenagers to the space.

The Contemporary Arts Museum—Houston, situated in Houston's museum district, spotlights contemporary art. The Contemporary Arts Museum—Houston presents extraordinary, thought-provoking arts programming and exhibitions to educate and inspire audiences nationally and internationally ("History & Mission"). As a "non-collecting" institution, it functions like a large gallery and that gives it flexibility in curating its shows ("Director's Note"). The museum's website asserts that the fourteen participant Teen Council serves at the Museum's vehicle for attracting the city's teen population to the museum and exposing them to contemporary art ("Teen Council"). Additionally, in 2012 the museum partnered with the historically black female institution, Spelman College, for the museum's biennial ("History & Mission").

The Walker Art Center is strategically stationed in the Lowry Hill section of Minneapolis, Minnesota, a neighborhood known for turn of the century Victorian homes. Its robust website leaves little reason to wonder why their social media presence has a considerable size. Founded in 1927 by the wealthy businessman Thomas Barlow Walker, its recent shows include a 1960–2016 Jasper Johns Retrospective (“Mission & History”). The museum welcomes teens to absorb the rich culture it provides. The Walker Art Center Teen Council, founded in 1994, “is a teen-led group of creators/advocates from all over the Twin Cities metropolitan area” (“Teen Programs”). The alumni of this teen program “attained scholarships for their work, secured curatorial and educational positions, and use their organizational and arts advocacy skills in their colleges and home communities” (“Teen Programs”). The Walker Art Center has been home to contemporary art for Minnesota’s community for over a century.

These four museums came together to determine how their institutions, with already successful teen programs, could be evaluated as one. Under the guise of Danielle Linzer, project director, the entire program was evaluated according to the same criteria. These programs bring highly diverse urban youth together to work collaboratively with museum staff and artists, developing vibrant activities and events to engage teen audiences, from tours and exhibitions to performances and fashion shows (Whitney Museum of American Art). Diversity in the program is important. A lot can be learned from the cultural exchange between black and white students. Black students must be comfortable being in art museums, which statistically have a majority white audience. Simultaneously, white students should be able to look around, know that it is normal to experience paintings with black subjects, curated by black scholars, while talking with black visitors.

Methods

It is important to understand why these four cities in particular were chosen. Texas, which is the second most populated state in the country, is made up of over twenty percent African Americans. Unfortunately, they have had a number of struggles in their educational progress in that state. In fact, only one college in all of Texas graduated more than one hundred African-American men in 2016 (Ayala). “Minnesota has a tradition of excellence in education, but its high school graduation rates are nothing to brag about—and for students of color, they’re among the worst in the nation” (Minnesota Public Radio News Staff). Writers at the *Los Angeles Times* pleaded the case that black students are one of the most likely groups to be the first in their family to attend college, and that difficulty navigating university life contributes to higher risk of dropping out (The Times Editorial Board). Finally, in New York City, while graduation rates are at record highs for all groups, blacks were twelve percent less likely to complete high school on time than their white counterparts (Algar). Fortunately, researchers have discovered that school partnership programs enhance skills that improve school readiness and that these programs, when done right, can improve the chances of black student’s ability to engage in activities that help their chances for academic success.

The program, Room to Rise, was launched in the early 1990s. The program lasted for about seven years, with students being added as participants graduated from high school. Organized as a four-museum study, each segment worked with about fifteen teens per year. Intensive teen partner programs were not a new phenomenon, but previously most programs collaborated with a single art museum. The participants of Room to Rise participated at their local museum, while the program is evaluated in its entirety. This multi-year, multi-visit study sought to understand whether alumni stay connected to the arts, if the programs contribute to

diversity aspirations of the participating art museums, and what short-term and long-term benefits impact the institution. Below you can see four teens from diverse backgrounds and gender examining a painting at the Whitney Museum of American Art (see fig. 5).



Figure 5: Room to Rise image of teens participating in the program,
Whitney Museum of American Art, www.whitney.org/Education/Teens/RoomToRise

The program was built around idea that engagement is essential to achieving positive results. These ideas were not groundbreaking. As the project director pointed out, “peer diversity is a key part of the selection process, with teens chosen for what they can contribute and how they can benefit from the program rather than for their academic or artistic achievements” (Linzer et al.). This gives the student who comes from an economically disadvantaged

community just as much of a chance as any other. Participants spend one full academic year in the program, meeting weekly, interacting with artists, staff, and the art. This long-term, intensive exposure provides a chance for them to build critical thinking skills over time. As Ossian Ward said, “A truly memorable or meaningful work of art shouldn’t rely on just one *overriding* message, but should present multiple solutions” (94), and Room to Rise works to generate multiple results.

Results

Generating results that are lasting and quantifiable is imperative. The Room to Rise program was designed in a spirit of mutual respect and collaboration; these programs benefit not just teen participants and their staff mentors but ultimately the fundamental culture of all four museums (Linzer et al.). This connection to alumni, staff, the museum, and most importantly the art will increase social capital for its participants. Teens will become adults who will continue to contribute to the atmosphere at art museums for years to come. Furthermore, Linzer’s findings revealed long-term results that included: a growth in confidence and the emergence of personal identity and self-knowledge; deep, lifelong relationships to museums and culture; a self-assured, intellectually curious pursuit of expanded career horizons and life skills; a lasting worldview grounded in art; and a commitment to community engagement and influence (24). In a post-program survey of this four-museum program, seventy-five percent of participants said the experience had a more positive influence than extracurricular activities or the internet (see fig. 6).

Figure 3: Experiences Alumni Identify as Positive Influences
Alumni rated the teen program experience as the most positive influence on their young lives. The number is similar for recent alumni and for those who experienced the program 15 to 20 years ago.

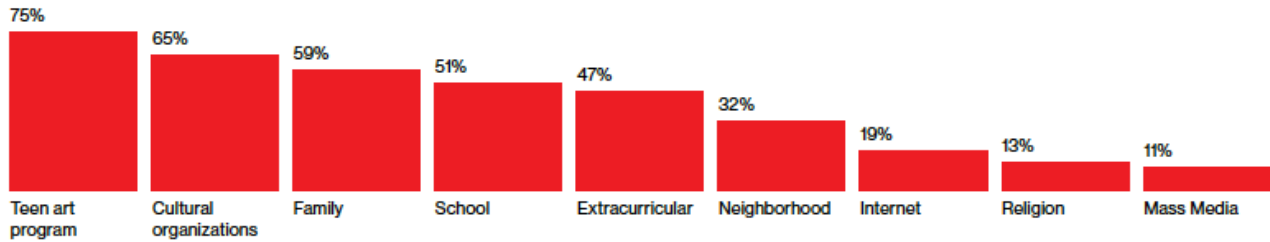


Figure 6: Room to Rise: Experiences Alumni Identify as Positive Influences

Whitney Museum of American Art, www.whitney.org/Education/Teens/RoomToRise

Even so, social capital and inclusion are said by many researchers to be an important aspect of what many black students lack. Danielle Linzer noted, “Alumni gained an expanded view of museums as places to learn and work, and some were motivated to pursue museum-related careers” (32). Most importantly, many researchers have determined that the biggest benefit of intensive exposure to art museums for teens is cultivating critical thinking skills. “Participants learn how to look at, engage with, discuss, and make meaning from art, skills that promote the development of visual and artistic literacy” (Linzer et al.). These are all the results that Yenawine and Housen hypothesized that participants would gain from techniques within Visual Thinking Strategies. Some researchers determined that disadvantaged students, who had the least amount of previous arts exposure, experienced the greatest benefits from programs like this (Kisida et al., 198). Unfortunately, this report removes the statistics around how many black students were participants. Admittedly, a very small number of students said, upon completing the program, that they had unrealistic expectations, feelings of disappointment or frustration, or

an inflated sense of access and entitlement (Linzer et al.). There leaves some room for improvement.

Thinking Through Art: Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum

Background

As Gabrielle Hick, writer for *Artsy*, points out, “At Boston’s Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, paintings by European heavyweights like Sandro Botticelli and Henri Matisse keep company with panel screens from the Japanese Edo period and wooden statuary from eleventh-century China” (Hick). The Gardner, as it is often referred to by insiders, sits only a few blocks away from the famed Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The museum is well-loved for its lush garden court, history of hosting classical music performances, and vast collection of European Renaissance paintings. One such painting in the collection is Sandro Botticelli’s *The Story of Lucretia*, actualized in the early 1500s, from the original collection of Mrs. Isabella Gardner (see fig. 7). To appreciate this painting, a student may need a little guidance to put the concepts of Visual Thinking Strategies to use. Additionally, the painting’s complex storytelling—it is a triptych, three scenes on one canvas—can confuse even an experienced viewer. In one swoop, Lucretia can be seen as sexually harassed and emotionally scarred, her body on public display after her premature death by suicide. Paintings like this cover the historic building that surrounds the courtyard. One can imagine that a child might be fascinated by the breadth of the collection, but also find it challenging if it is their first introduction to art.



Figure 7: Sandro Botticelli. *The Story of Lucretia*. 1500

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Taken 8 Mar 2019, by Charles Moore

Most teens and children seek newer technology, sleeker designs, and motifs that are more relatable than the older paintings, building architecture and dated technology of the original Gardner Museum building. So, in 2012, when the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's new contemporary design addition opened, it had a younger audience in mind. Inside the new wing, designed by Renzo Piano, there is a performance hall, a special exhibitions gallery, a new restaurant, a gift shop, a studio that doubles as a classroom, expanded outdoor garden spaces, two artist apartments, conservation labs, and a hands-on art workshop (Meinhold). This minimalist design accompanied their increased interest in adding more contemporary art pieces. Right around this time, a few educators ramped up their Boston area school partnership programs and Thinking Through Art was created.

The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's website asserts that, "Thinking Through Art trains teachers to use an innovative, rigorous discussion method called Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to integrate group discussion and reflective practice in their classroom" (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum). Additionally, their research with elementary, middle, and high school students shows that students who participate in regular Visual Thinking Strategies discussions with works of art increased their critical thinking skills, including supported observations and flexible thinking, compared with peers who do not participate (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum). Other scholars have discussed the increased academic achievement when children are exposed to art. Sylvia Pantaleo, University of Victoria professor and author wrote about how the explicit instruction of elements of visual art and design of picture books can develop students' critical thinking skills. Pantaleo's research found that students needed to create or generate thoughts about the artwork in tandem with monitoring and assessing their thinking according to specific criteria (156).

Methods

Isabella Stewart Gardner's Thinking Through Art program comes with years of research behind it. A 2003 research report found that as many as half of American museums offer some form of a multiple-visit school program where students might visit the museum from two to ten times a year (Adams et al.). Originally, Thinking Through Art was geared toward only elementary students, but later opened up to middle school and high school students. Today the program looks very different from its previous iterations. Kris Wetterlund, Director of Education at the Corning Museum of Glass, talks about new technologies that make bringing art to students simple. Wetterlund's research found that new technologies have made it possible for art

museums to imagine, create, and deliver a broad array of teaching resources, from online interactive multimedia to tools teachers use to create their own resources. It was during her Educator in Residency at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum that she helped streamline the Thinking Through Art program.

Formally known as the School Partnership Program, Thinking Through Art now starts by training the teachers (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum). First, there is a Level 1, which functions as an introduction to the program, while Level 2 is for previous participants or those who completed Level 1. To be eligible for the program, applicants must be teaching grades 3-12 in a Boston Public School (Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum). However, no resources are provided specifically for students in lower socioeconomic communities around Boston. According to the website, preferences are given to cohorts of teachers from the same school; regrettably, this leads to increased participation by schools with extensive financial resources. At both levels, the teacher receives professional development benefits in the form of graduate credit, workshops, and coaching. Meanwhile, the student receives additional instruction by a museum educator, a one-year family membership, and has their transportation covered by the museum. The results from the Thinking Through Art program mirror the scholastic findings by other researchers in the field mentioned in this paper.

Results

As shown in the previous case study, Room to Rise, school partnership programs can be very successful. Results for Isabella Stewart Gardner's school programs were promising even after the original cohort was completed more than a decade ago. Famous artists like Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, often referred simply as Caravaggio, are referenced to teach the children in the

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum program. The 2006 follow-up report noted that, when asked to “think out loud” about the Caravaggio reproduction, the students demonstrated higher frequencies of critical thinking skills and support for assertions (8). This gave researchers the confidence to continue their studies. After implementing a writing sample at the end of the one-year program for grade 9 students, other interesting details were detected. Researchers for the Edward M. Kennedy Academy for Health Careers discovered “an increase in supported observations suggests that the students are using evidence to ground their ideas about artwork, both in oral language and writing.” (4)

Finally, prior research by Brian Kisida has shown that exposure to an art museum’s educational programs creates cultural consumers with an increased desire to engage with cultural institutions and the arts generally (198). As Kris Wetterlund noted, art museums’ collections span the creative history of humankind, art museums are in the business of collecting, exhibiting, and interpreting sculpture; painting; drawing; printmaking; photography; textiles; decorative arts such as furniture, porcelain, ceramics and glass; graphic art; and even architecture (111). This limitless supply of resources leaves children with many options to explore and learn, if they are lucky enough to have access. However, none of the data confirmed or denied the existence of a larger than normal number of African American students that benefited from the participation in the Isabella Stewart Gardner’s Thinking Through Art program. In fact, there is no data collected that discerns which cultural groups participate in the program. Unfortunately, segregation within the Boston Public Schools still exists today. A reporter for *The Atlantic* found that “over the years, an insidious form of educational gerrymandering has built invisible and arbitrary borders that separate poorer districts serving mostly students of color from adjacent districts serving more affluent children who benefit from greater resources” (Maffai). Therefore, museums have a

moral obligation to include black students in their school partnership programs. And as Dena Beard, art history professor and curator wrote, “museums must reverse the damage of coercive exploitation by clearly and publicly giving reparations on the basis of race in their leadership, collecting, and commissioning strategies” (11). Only then can it be discerned the Thinking Through Art program is including a material number of Boston area black students.

What Brings About Change

Why Museum Leadership Matters

Change at museums starts at the top. As previously noted, museums exclude African Americans from leadership positions and staff. This practice of exclusion makes it necessary to start culturally specific museums. Edward Luby, former director at the Berkeley Natural History Museums at the University of California, Berkeley, says that culturally specific museums are developed because the viewpoint reflected by traditional art museums is perceived as excluding the experiences of certain cultural and ethnic groups. However, these museums normally employ a smaller number of people and produce fewer exhibitions. Although culturally specific museums are important, they make up a minor number of art institutions. Mainstream art museums have more exhibitions and visitors; therefore, they can influence more people.

This is why the mainstream museums are where change is needed the most. Stories like that of Kristen Windmuller-Luna are no surprise to some people. Many critics, including the notable writer for *Artnet*, Tim Schneider, discussed the backlash primarily centered on the hire of Windmuller-Luna, a white woman who is the Sills Family Consulting Curator for the Brooklyn Museum’s African art program. While the Windmuller-Luna story may make headlines, it only serves as a reminder that over eighty percent of art museum curators are white. There are

enormous inequities at art museums. Excluding black curators from art museums remains an issue that prohibits black students from feeling comfortable inside art museums. Programs like Room to Rise and Thinking Through Art can encourage more students of color to increase their social capital and have their voices be heard—not muted—in the museum world.

Why Exhibitions Matter

Exhibitions are extremely important deciders of how art museums explain history. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminds us, “unlike things, animals, and plants, people are not only objects of cultural preservations but also subjects.” (199) In art museums, these subjects are discussed and permanently archived in carefully curated exhibitions. For example, the Kerry James Marshall exhibition, cleverly titled *Mastry*, held at the Met Breuer in 2016, was described as exhilarating. Many art critics gave the exhibition a positive review, including famed writer Peter Schjeldahl. Schjeldahl proclaimed, “It is a big deal for three reasons: it marks the museum’s blessing of Marshall and, in turn, Marshall’s benediction of the museum, and it affirms a revival of grandly scaled, thematic figurative painting” (Schjeldahl). Marshall, as Schjeldahl writes, has strictly depicted African American life and experience since 1980. This show held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s space dedicated to contemporary art gives voice to an African American artist conspicuously educating viewers about African American culture.

Diversity in art museum collections educates museum visitors. Zanna Gilbert, research specialist at the Getty Research Institute, defines diversity in collections as extremely important because the scope of collections to some degree dictate the kinds of stories that can be told in museums (45). For example, one painting included in the *Mastry* exhibition is a painting called *Bang*. (See Fig. 8) In this painting there are three black children, probably between the ages of

ten and fifteen, playing in a backyard. The girl is holding the American flag, while twin boys have their hands on their heart, most likely pledging their allegiance to the United States of America. A BBQ grill is prominently planted near the children, while a white picket fence surrounds them on their back lawn, telling the viewer this is a typical American family. Cleverly written beneath them are the words “Happy July 4 Bang,” with each word given its own pink cloud that encloses it. Additionally, the phrase “We are one” is written on a white banner wrapped around the clouds. Traditional American celebrations are written all over this depiction of an African American family, who participate in the same festivities as their white counterparts. A painting like this is yet another example of why collections and exhibitions matter.



Figure 8: Kerry James Marshall, *Bang*, 1994 Photo credit by The Progressive Art Collection
www.progressive.com/artcollection/highlights.html

Conclusion

Connecting black students to art museums remains critical to ensure these students benefit from intensive exposure to art. School partnership programs with museums have demonstrated extraordinary results. Programs like Room to Rise and Thinking Through Art provide not only a platform for black students to learn but create a balance in all aspect of the museum world. The four museums involved in Room to Rise included hundreds of children from four cities. Additionally, Thinking Through Art served kids all over the Boston area, allowing them access to the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. Together, these programs create a space for a diverse group of teens to learn from each other, while also incorporating the pedagogical techniques of VTS. For all of these reasons, museums play a crucial role in connecting black students to art. It is equally as important for programs like these to continue, as it is for these programs to assert an importance of including black students.

Art museums must discontinue exclusionary practices and connect black students to their institutions. Far too often, as in the case of the Warhol and Beasley exhibits last year, great ideas garner insignificant attendance from the black audience. Furthermore, partnerships between art museums and schools play a major role in helping to sharpen critical thinking skills of children. Even so, in the black community statistics surrounding museum attendance, employment at art museums, and school graduation rates continue to be extremely low (Bates; “Public High School Graduation Rates”). Furthermore, a history of oppression and muting the voice of black artists and curators have made art museums microcosms of the same exclusionary practices seen throughout American history. The sense of cultural literacy taught by exposure to art museums

should not be given to a select few, and yet over the years it has been. Additionally, the benefits black students will gain from Visual Thinking Strategies, *Ways of Seeing*, and other similar teaching methods will increase critical thinking skills and improve academic achievement.

Improving critical thinking skills is only part of why connecting black students to art museums is important. Previous programs like Room to Rise and Thinking Through Art suggest that early exposure and multiple visits over time also improves student engagement.

Simultaneously exhibiting artists like Kevin Beasley along with Andy Warhol reminds not only black students that their voices matter, but it also shows white students the gifted creativity of black artists. Connecting black students to art museums is not limited to the pedagogical results, because improved social capital helps create a new counterculture: inclusion. Art museums have yet to figure out how to make their buildings a place that welcomes black students. One way to do this is continuing to support and exhibit artist like Kevin Beasley and assure their stories are not lost. Museums must do better.

Future Research

This capstone paper shows that there are gaps that need to be addressed. Even in the twenty-first century, the constitution of museums remains largely white. There is a great opportunity to make material changes. First, school/museum partnerships programs need to improve. The number of black students included in these programs must increase to a rate higher than the current trends in black adults that visit museums. Besides, researchers like Brian Kisida have already determined that black students stand the greatest chance to benefit from these programs. Curators are influential, because they acquire the works held by museums and formulate the exhibitions that museums visitors experience. Training black curators starts with increasing the number of black

students in Art History PhD programs. Universities like Harvard, Yale, Columbia and Princeton historically see their graduates garnering the most coveted museum and professor roles.

Similarly, a jump in black PhD candidates in areas like education will give black scholars the research tools to provide more empirical evidence that show the results from increased exposure to art museums for black students. Furthermore, visitor studies research needs to be conducted to determine why black and white adults visit art museums, and why not. While creating programs that get black students into art museums is crucial, art museums must also determine how to keep them there when they become adults. Lastly, inclusion in museums starts with what art we hang on the walls. Contemporary artist Zachary Cahill made clear, “God didn’t hang this painting in the museum, we did” (13). Since time alone has not increased the number of black students connecting with art museums, we must change this ourselves.

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