

“Can you get a job doing that?": Reimagining the Arts and Humanities

“Can you make any money doing that?” As a chair of a fine arts department I have been asked some form of that question by parents more often than any other question concerning their child’s education. Increasingly, the worth of any college degree is determined by the value it has in the market place. Considering the rising costs of a college education, students and their parents have embraced the idea that they are consumers and that a college degree should provide some sort assurance of future employability. As we recruit the best and brightest to our programs, we are indirectly telling them that they have a future in their chosen field. Consequently, we as academic leaders have some responsibility, beyond writing a glowing recommendation letter, in making sure our programs not only prepare graduates to make meaningful contributions to their field, but to be employed while they do it.

Commodification has become the context in which we do our most important work. This session will explore best practices and strategies programs in the arts and humanities have used to prepare their graduates for careers in and outside the academy. I will share my personal experiences and the strategies that have helped me change the opinion at our institution about the value of the arts in higher education. In the process, I have been able to increase financial support and develop new advocates for our programs both on and off campus.

Rather, than a critique on the commodification of education, this session will encourage participants to focus on ways to reframe the discussion about value and salience. It is an invitation to reimagine: 1) the curriculum; 2) the role of complementary learning opportunities; 3) boundaries between the arts and humanities and other fields; and 4) the intersections between the arts and commerce.