

Flourishing in Art Museums:
Recommendations Based on a
Survey of Art Museum Professionals

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Executive Summary

People visit art museums for a variety of reasons, including to see something beautiful or famous, to learn more about art, or to experience a sense of awe. Recently, there has been increased interest in how art museum engagement can promote flourishing. Little is known, however, about how the professionals shaping these experiences—the curators, educators, docents, front of house personnel—view the role of art museums in promoting flourishing outcomes.

To learn more about their perspectives, we surveyed more than 200 art museum professionals from at over 100 art museums regarding their views on 1) the aims of art museums, 2) the ability of art museums to influence a range of flourishing outcomes (e.g., empathy, loneliness, self-acceptance, anxiety), and 3) how effective art museums are in addressing these flourishing outcomes.

According to our findings, art museum professionals felt that 1) the well-being of visitors should be more highly prioritized as an aim of art museums than it currently is, 2) several flourishing outcomes (e.g., cultivating empathy, increasing helping behavior, reducing closed-mindedness) should receive greater emphasis than they currently do, and 3) art museums are not yet fully equipped to address many flourishing outcomes. Based on these findings, we provide specific recommendations for the flourishing outcomes museums should focus on, as well as areas in which further research and development are needed to enable art museums to optimize their impact on human flourishing.

Background

Visiting art museums is a popular way of engaging with visual art.¹ People visit art museums for a variety of reasons, including to relax or to learn something new.²⁻⁴ More recently, there has been increased interest in understanding the role art museums play in promoting flourishing in museum visitors.

What Is Flourishing?

Flourishing is a multi-faceted way of approaching overall quality of life in terms of two basic conditions: low ill-being and high well-being. It is important to consider both of these conditions, since flourishing is more than just the absence of ill-being. The World Health Organization defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.⁵ This emphasis on looking beyond the lack of illness as the only indicator of health provides an opportunity to consider a range of positive factors that contribute to a flourishing life.

Low Ill-Being concerns the absence of diseases, disorders, and other negative states and traits. The goal of focusing on ill-being related factors is to mitigate or reduce any existing ill-being and to prevent future occurrences of ill-being.

High Well-Being concerns the presence of strengths, meaning, and other positive states and traits. The goal of focusing on well-being related factors is to preserve existing well-being and to promote well-being in the future.⁶

In this project, we focus mainly on the impact of art engagement on individual flourishing, not because collective flourishing is any less important but because research on its impact on collective flourishing is significantly less advanced.

What Do We Know About Art Engagement and Flourishing?

Engaging with the arts can lead to a range of benefits, and research efforts to understand the links between art engagement and human flourishing are growing. A review of current research indicates that art engagement has been consistently associated with a range of flourishing outcomes.⁷ Notable documented benefits of art engagement include reduced risk for mental health conditions,^{8,9} greater subjective health,¹⁰ lower mortality risks,^{11,12} and less loneliness.¹³

The *Positive Humanities* are a new field that seeks to understand connections between engagement with the arts and humanities and a range of flourishing outcomes.¹⁴ Integrating approaches from the arts and humanities with methods of scientific investigation used in psychology and other social sciences, this field advances a balanced and comprehensive approach to human flourishing.

What Do We Know About Art Museums and Flourishing?

Although the arts may be encountered in a number of forms in a variety of contexts, art museums are a common way in which people engage with art.¹ They serve as unique contexts in which to view art, allowing visitors to reflect on their lives, their future, and the world in which they live.¹⁵

For these reasons, it is not surprising that researchers have become increasingly interested in understanding how art museum visitation may lead to flourishing outcomes. Research has tended to focus on four domains:

- **Mental and Physical Health:** Visiting art museums is associated with reductions in cortisol (a hormone related to stress),^{16,17} lower levels of anxiety¹⁸ and depression,¹⁹ and lower risk of being diagnosed with dementia.²⁰
- **Subjective Well-Being and Health:** Visiting art museums has been linked to better subjective judgments of well-being,^{17,19} better quality of life,^{21,22} and better self-reported health.²³
- **Emotional Well-Being:** Visiting art museums and engaging in museum programming is related to higher levels of positive emotions (e.g., happiness, cheerfulness)^{24,25} and is viewed as a rewarding experience.²⁶
- **Social Connection and Loneliness:** Art museums can serve as community builders,²² providing visitors with a sense of being able to connect with others^{24,27} and with feelings of greater inclusion.²⁸

Project Goals and Research Questions

Even though research has found several links between art museum engagement and flourishing, it is important to understand how art museum professionals view the potential of art museums to support flourishing in visitors. This is especially important since art museum professionals are integral to the visitor

experience, shaping how exhibits are curated, what programs are offered, and the types of interactions visitors have during their time at the museum. To learn about the views of art museum professionals on various aspects of the relationship between art museums and flourishing, we conducted a survey of more than 200 professionals at over 100 museums.

There were two broad goals for this project:

1. To understand the views of art museum professionals on the aims of art museums. There were three research questions linked to this goal:
 - What are the current aims of art museums?
 - What should the aims of art museums be?
 - How effective are art museums currently at achieving these different aims?

2. To understand the views of art museum professionals on the effects art museum engagement can have on various aspects of flourishing, as well as their views on what flourishing outcomes should be prioritized. There were three research questions linked to this aim:
 - How likely are art museums to support a range of flourishing currently?
 - What flourishing outcomes should art museums prioritize?
 - How well-equipped are art museums for increasing flourishing currently?

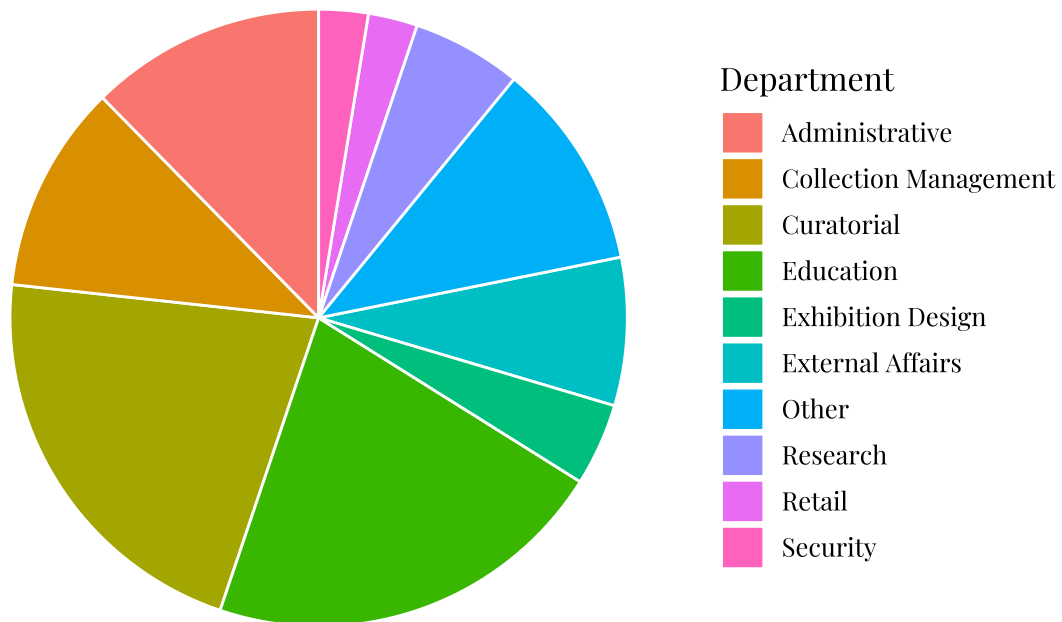
Participants and Methodology

Survey Participants

We recruited participants by distributing study information to museum-related organizations, including the American Alliance of Museums, the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries, and the National Art Education Association. We also recruited participants by contacting individual art museums to encourage dissemination within their professional networks.

A total of 208 art museum professionals participated in the project. They were predominantly female (79.33%), middle-aged ($M = 40.34$, $range = 21 - 70$), and White (89.42%). Participants were affiliated with 116 different art museums and worked in a variety of departments within their institution (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1
Museum Department



Assessing Aims of Art Museums

The specific aims we examined in this survey fall into one of three categories: art-focused aims, visitor-focused aims, and community-focused aims.

Art-focused aims emphasize functions that directly involve the art in the care of the museum. The specific aims we examined include collecting art, displaying art, preserving art, and researching art.

Visitor-focused aims emphasize functions that revolve around the experiences of individual visitors. The specific aims we examined include appreciating art, increasing visitor knowledge, educational opportunities, and increasing well-being.

Community-focused aims emphasize functions that involve cultivating and supporting the broader community. The specific aims we examined include providing opportunities for social interaction, supporting artists, providing regional insight, encouraging cultural engagement, changing people's worldview, and promoting community cohesion.

For each aim, art museum professionals indicated, on a 1 - 7 scale, 1) how important the aim is for the *current* mission of art museums (*Not at all important* to *Very important*), 2) how important the aim is for the *ideal* mission of art museums (*Not at all important* to *Very important*), and 3) how *well-equipped* art museums are for achieving each aim (*Not at all equipped* to *Very well-equipped*).

Assessing Flourishing

Ill-Being Factors

Ill-being represents negative factors that, ideally, should be mitigated or prevented. In this project, we examined 14 ill-being related factors: anxiety, negative emotions, stress, daily hassles, boredom, physical illness, mental illness, loneliness, social disconnect, burnout, lethargy, closed-mindedness, depression, aches, self-doubt, and irritability.¹

For each factor, art museum professionals indicated, on a 1 - 7 scale, 1) *how likely* visiting an art museum is to reduce the factor (*Not at all likely to reduce*

¹Some of these factors may be natural and appropriate responses to the art being viewed and thus may not represent a negative state in every situation.

to *Very likely to reduce*), 2) how important it is for art museums to *prioritize reducing* the factor (*Not at all important to reduce* to *Very important to reduce*), and 3) how *well-equipped* art museums currently are for reducing the factor (*Not at all equipped* to *Very well-equipped*).

Well-Being Factors

Well-being represents positive qualities that, ideally, should be promoted or preserved. In this project, we examined 14 well-being related factors: self-acceptance, autonomy, competence, emotional stability, engagement, empathy, helping, meaning, optimism, positive emotions, positive relationships, resilience, self-esteem, vitality, clear thinking, and accomplishment.²

For each factor, art museum professionals indicated, on a 1 - 7 scale, 1) *how likely* visiting an art museum is to improve the factor (*Not at all likely to improve* to *Very likely to improve*), 2) how important it is for art museums to *prioritize improving* the factor (*Not at all important to reduce* to *Very important to reduce*), and 3) how *well-equipped* art museums currently are for improving the factor (*Not at all equipped* to *Very well-equipped*).

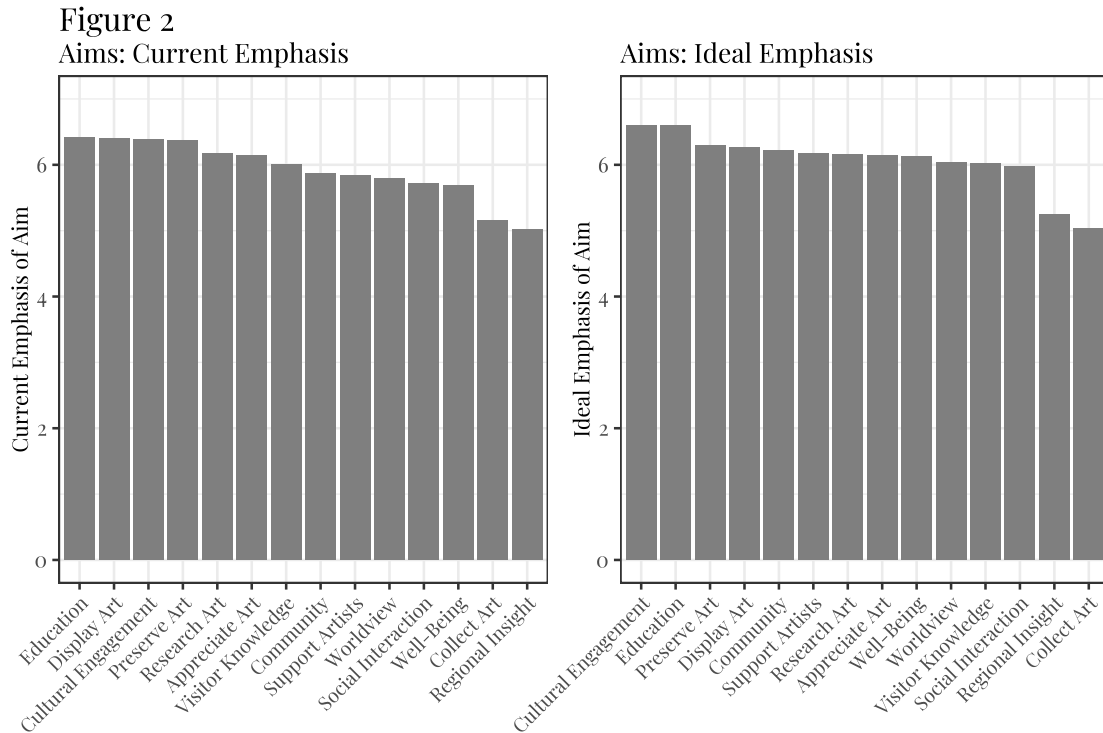
²Some of these factors may not be fitting responses to the art being viewed and thus may not represent a positive state in every situation.

Findings and Recommendations

Aims of Art Museums

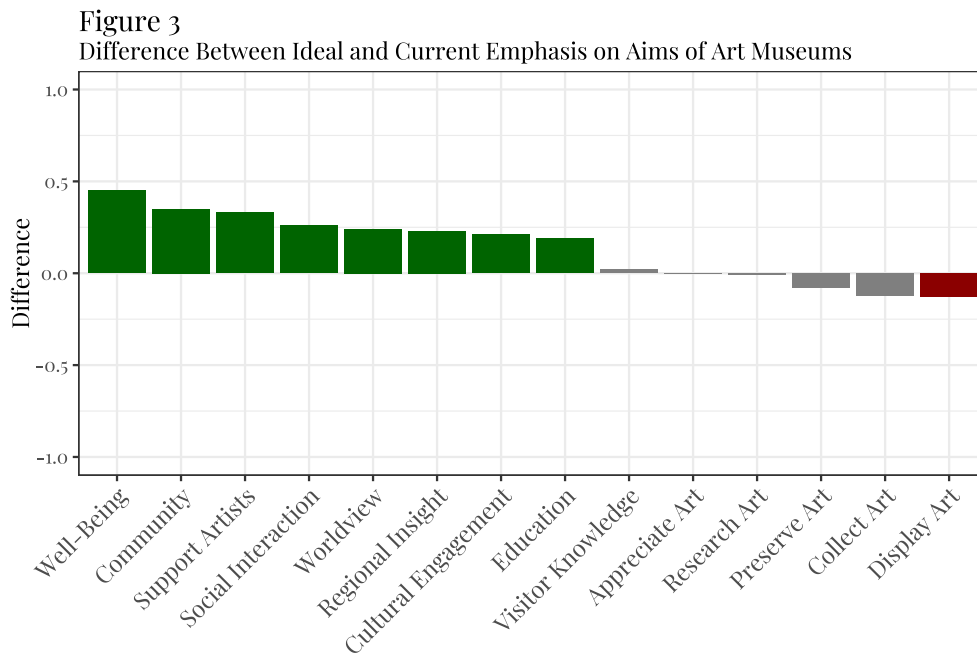
The first set of findings concerns the views of art museum professionals on the current and ideal aims of art museums.

Art museum professionals reported that art museums currently emphasize aims related to educational opportunities, displaying art, and providing opportunities for cultural engagement (see Figure 2, left). They saw collecting art and providing regional insight as the specific aims receiving the lowest emphasis in current practices. When considering the ideal levels of emphasis art museums should place on specific individual aims, art museum professionals gave high ratings for providing opportunities for cultural engagement, education, and preserving art (see Figure 2, right). Interestingly, they gave collecting art and providing regional insight the lowest ratings, indicating the view that these aims should not be prioritized as highly as the others.



Note: The bars indicate the average current emphasis (left panel) and the average ideal emphasis (right panel) rating for each aim (from *Not at all important* to *Very important*).

Comparing the current and ideal aims of art museums reported by art museum professionals makes it possible to determine whether they believe certain aims should be more or less highly prioritized than they currently are (see Figure 3). They identified eight aims as deserving more emphasis, with increasing visitor well-being as the aim with the biggest discrepancy between current and ideal practices. In general, art museum professionals reported that art-focused aims are currently emphasized at appropriate levels, identifying only one aim as deserving less emphasis: displaying art.³



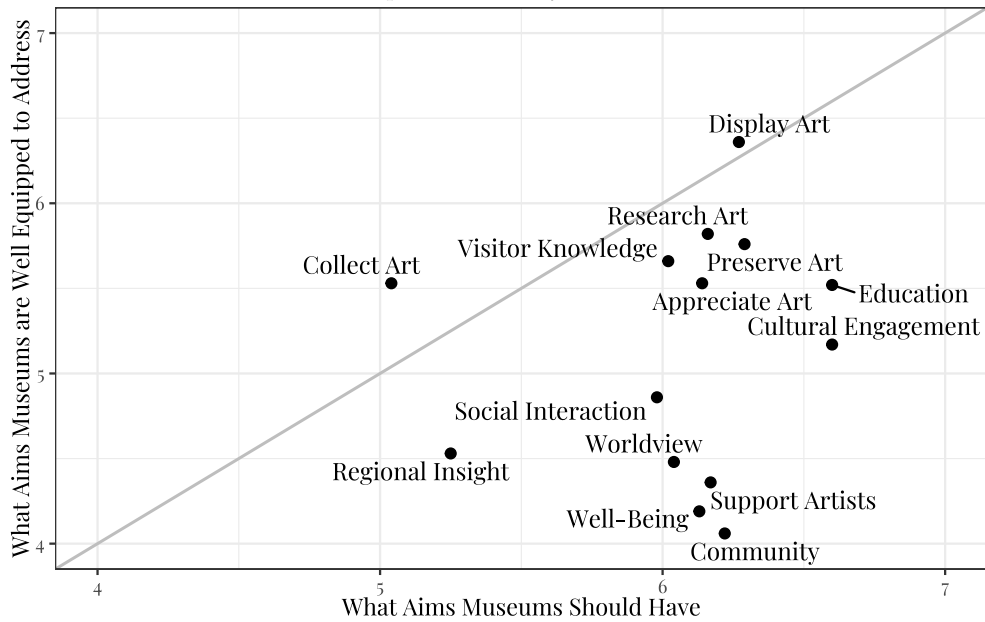
Note: Bar height indicates the difference between current and ideal levels of emphasis reported for specific aims of art museums. Positive values indicate a higher ideal rating than current rating; negative values indicate a higher current rating than ideal rating. Bars colored green and red represent aims where the difference in ratings between ideal and current levels of emphasis were statistically significant.

Additionally, we examined respondents' views on how well equipped art museums are for addressing each aim, given its ideal level of prioritization. Comparing ratings for the ideal emphasis on each aim with ratings for how well equipped art museum professionals feel to address them allows us to determine the level of preparation for each aim. We consider art museums to be adequately prepared

³Note that we are not advocating that factors for which likelihood of reduction is significantly higher than prioritization (factors in red in Figure 3) are places where art museums should attempt to be less effective. These are areas in which art museums are perceived as doing relatively well, and we recommend current efforts in these areas be maintained.

to address a particular aim if the level at which staff feel equipped to address it matches or exceeds the aim’s level of importance. We consider art museums to be inadequately prepared to address a particular aim if the level at which staff feel equipped to address it is below the aim’s level of importance. On this criterion, art museum professionals reported being adequately prepared to address only the aims of collecting art and displaying art. They reported being inadequately prepared to address all of the rest of the aims (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
Aims of Art Museums: Ideal Emphasis vs. Ability to Address

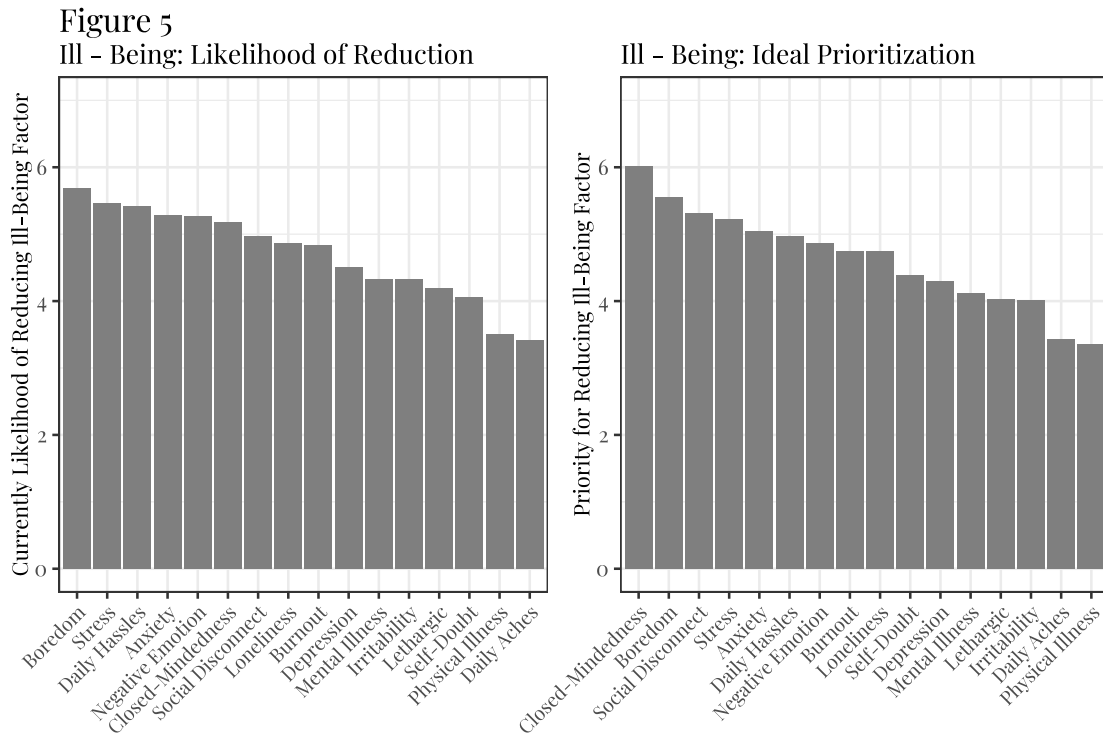


Note: The horizontal axis indicates ratings for the ideal emphasis on each aim (*Not at all important* to *Very important*), and the vertical axis indicates ratings for how well equipped art museums are to address each aim (*Not at all equipped* to *Very well equipped*). The average response for each aim is indicated by a point. The gray diagonal line represents when ratings for the ideal emphasis for the aim and ratings for the ability to address the aim are equal. Aims above the diagonal line are those that respondents believe art museums are adequately prepared to address; aims below the diagonal line are those that respondents believe art museums are inadequately prepared to address.

Reducing Ill-Being through Art Museums

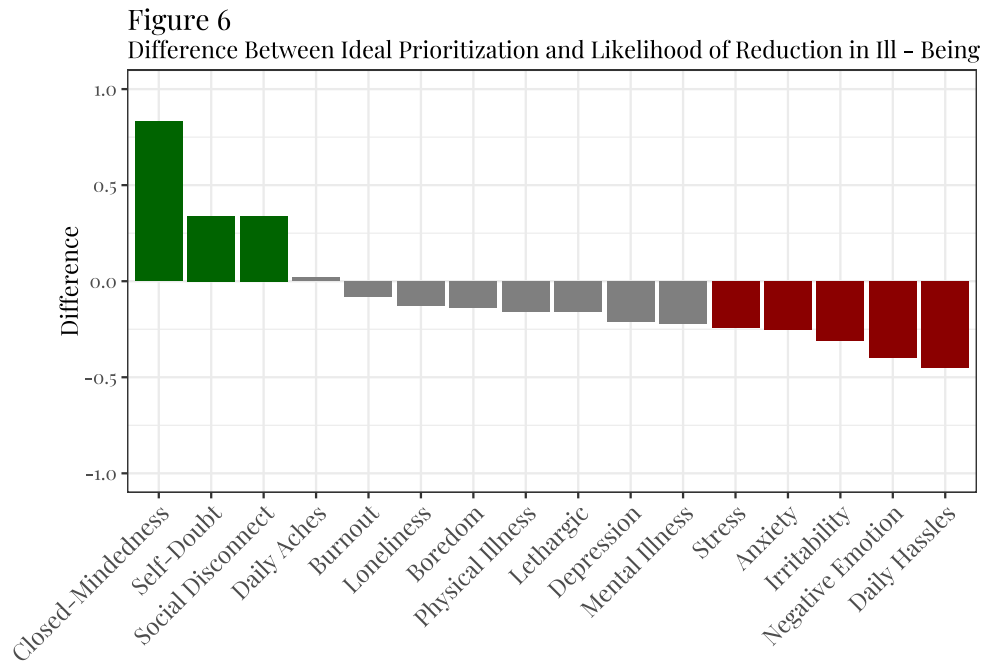
The second set of findings concerns the views of art museum professionals on the reduction of ill-being factors in visitors through art museum engagement. In particular, these findings explore which ill-being factors art museum professionals believe can be reduced and which ill-being factors they believe art museums should prioritize reducing. These findings can help us identify which ill-being factors art museums should focus on to help increase visitor flourishing most effectively.

Art museum professionals reported that the ill-being factors art museums are most likely to reduce are boredom and stress and that art museums are least likely to reduce symptoms of physical illness and daily aches or pains (see Figure 5, left). Art museum professionals felt that the ill-being factors art museums should most prioritize reducing are closed-mindedness and boredom, and that reducing symptoms of physical illness and daily aches or pains should not be prioritized as highly as other factors (see Figure 5, right). These results indicate that respondents believe it is important for art museums to work to reduce a number of ill-being factors in museum visitors.



Note: The bars indicate the average current likelihood of reduction (left panel) and the average ideal prioritization (right panel) rating for each ill-being factor (from *Not at all important* to *Very important*).

Comparing the ratings for likelihood of reduction for each ill-being factor with the ratings for its recommended level of prioritization points to areas of opportunity for art museums. Factors for which ideal prioritization is significantly higher than the current likelihood of reduction are places where we recommend museums change their practices to make it more likely that these important ill-being factors will be reduced through museum visits. Survey results identify three such factors: closed-mindedness, self-doubt, and social disconnect (see Figure 6).⁴



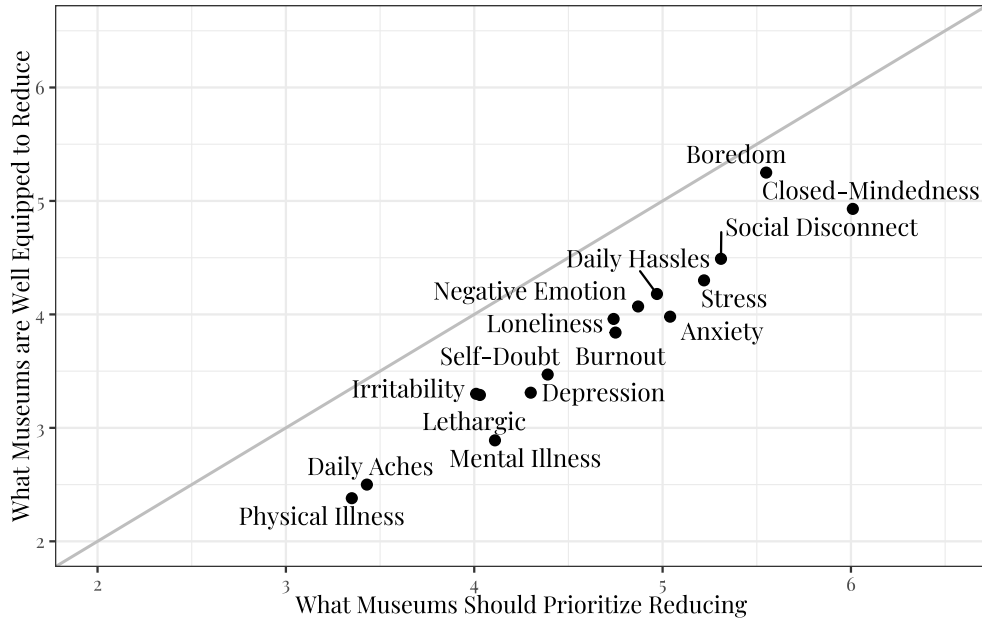
Note: Bar height indicates the difference between ideal priority levels and likelihood of reduction reported for specific ill-being factors. Positive values indicate a higher ideal priority than current reduction likelihood; negative values indicate a lower ideal priority than current reduction likelihood. Bars colored green and red represent ill-being factors where the difference in ratings between ideal priority level and current likelihood of reduction were statistically significant.

Finally, we examined respondents' views on how well equipped art museums are for reducing each ill-being factor, given its ideal level of prioritization. Respondents indicated that they believe art museums are inadequately equipped to address each of the ill-being factors (see Figure 7).

⁴Note that we are not advocating that factors for which likelihood of reduction is significantly higher than prioritization (factors in red in Figure 6) are places where art museums should attempt to be less effective. These are areas in which art museums are perceived as doing relatively well, and we recommend current efforts in these areas be maintained.

In light of these findings, we recommend that art museums and researchers work together to develop ways of better equipping art museum professionals for decreasing the entire range of ill-being factors, but especially those identified earlier as having the biggest difference between likelihood of reduction and ideal prioritization: closed-mindedness, self-doubt, and social disconnect.

Figure 7
Ill - Being: Ideal Prioritization vs. Ability to Address

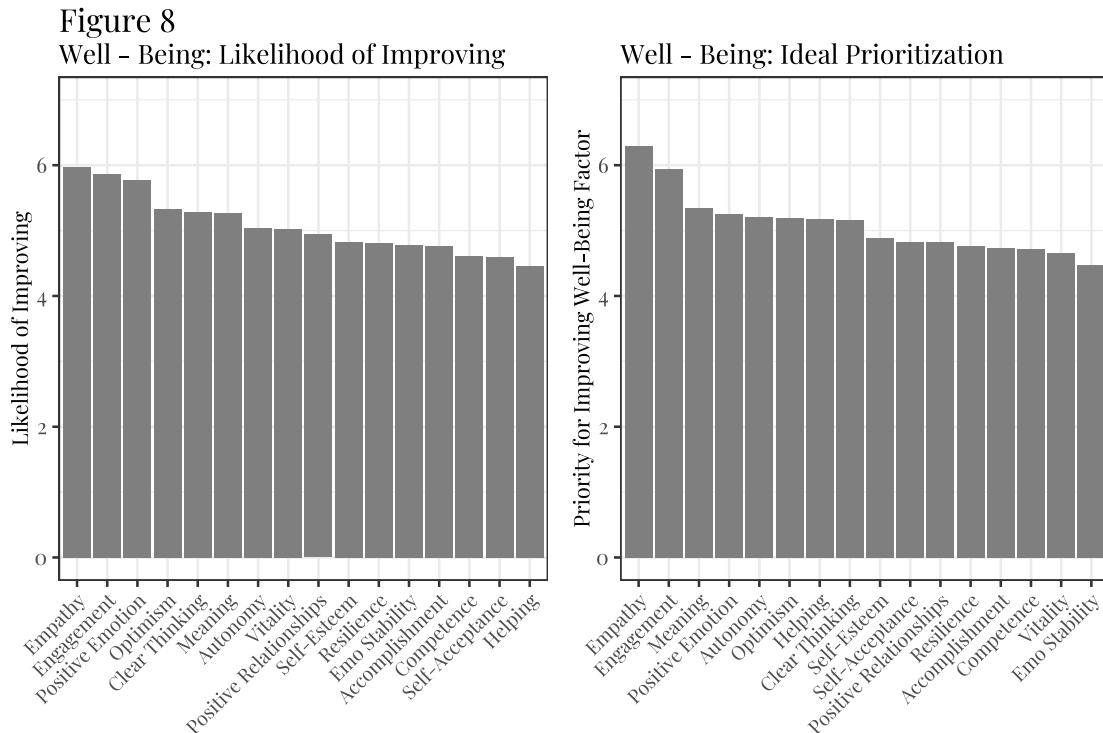


Note: The horizontal axis indicates ratings for the degree to which reducing each ill-being factor should be prioritized (*Not at all important to reduce to Very important to reduce*), and the vertical axis indicates ratings for how well equipped art museums are for reducing each ill-being factor (*Not at all equipped to Very well-equipped*). The average response for each ill-being factor is indicated by a point. The gray diagonal line represents when ratings for ideal level of priority and ratings for the ability to reduce each ill-being factor are equal. Ill-being factors above the diagonal line are those that respondents believe art museums are adequately prepared to reduce; ill-being factors below the diagonal line are those that they believe art museums are inadequately prepared to reduce.

Increasing Well-Being through Art Museums

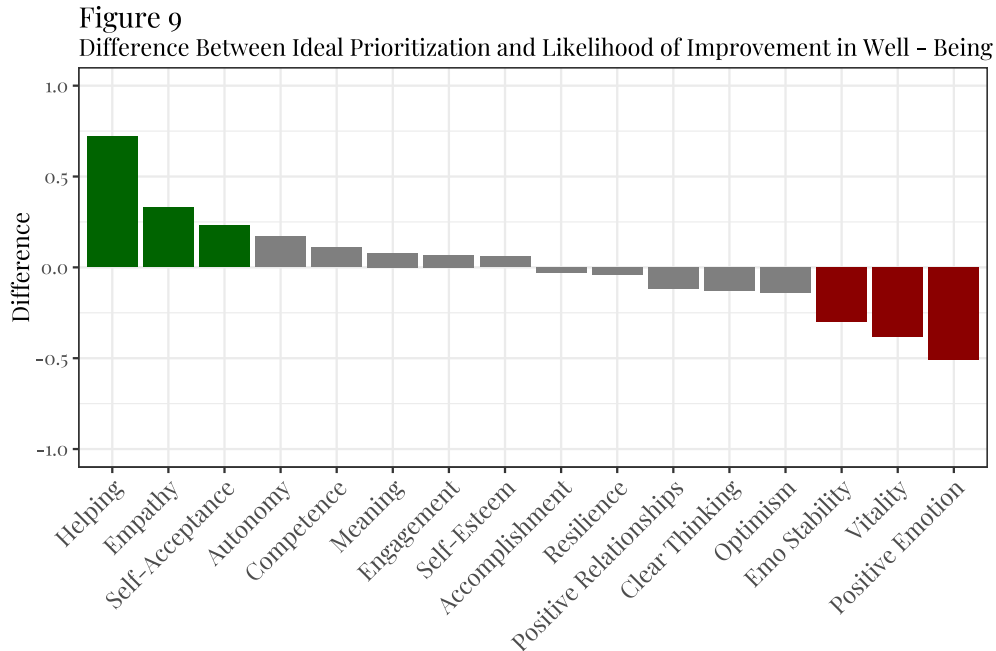
The third set of findings concerns the views of art museum professionals on the improvement of well-being factors in visitors through art museum engagement. In particular, these findings explore which well-being factors art museum professionals believe can be improved and which well-being factors they believe art museums should prioritize improving. These findings can help identify which well-being factors art museums should focus on to help increase visitor flourishing most effectively.

Art museum professionals reported that the well-being factors art museums are most likely to improve are empathy and engagement, and that art museums are least likely to improve helping behaviors and self-acceptance (see Figure 8, left). Art museum professionals reported that the well-being factors art museums should most prioritize improving are also empathy and engagement and that improving emotional stability and vitality should not be prioritized as highly as the other factors (see Figure 8, right). These results indicate that respondents believe it is important for art museums to work to improve a number of well-being factors in museum visitors.



Note: The bars indicate the average current likelihood of improving (left) and average ideal prioritization (right) rating for each well-being factor (from *Not at all important* to *Very important*).

Comparing the ratings for likelihood of improvement for each well-being factor with their recommended level of prioritization points to areas of opportunity for art museums. Factors for which ideal prioritization is significantly higher than the current likelihood of improvement are places where we recommend museums change their practices to make it more likely that these important well-being factors will be improved through museum visits. Survey results identify three such factors: helping behaviors, empathy, and self-acceptance (see Figure 9).⁵



Note: Bar height indicates the difference between ideal priority levels and likelihood of improvement for specific well-being factors. Positive values indicate a higher ideal priority than current improvement likelihood; negative values indicate a lower ideal priority than current improvement likelihood. Bars colored green and red represent well-being factors where the difference in ratings between ideal priority level and current likelihood of improvement were statistically significant.

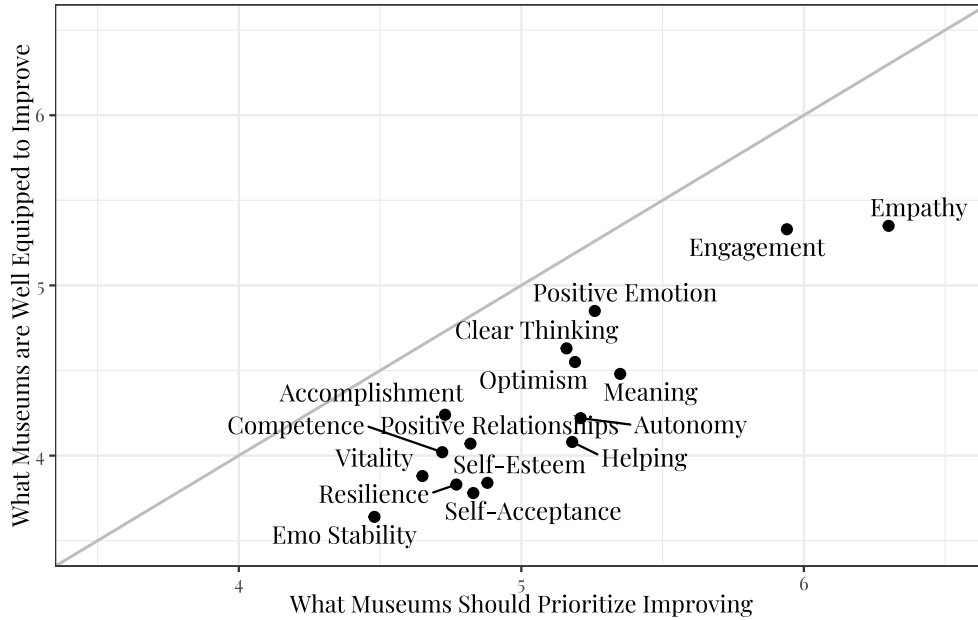
Finally, we examined respondents' views on how well equipped art museums are for improving each well-being factor, given its ideal level of prioritization. Respondents indicated that they believe art museums are inadequately equipped to address each of the well-being factors (see Figure 10).

In light of these findings, we recommend that art museums and researchers

⁵Note that we are not advocating that factors for which likelihood of improvement is significantly higher than prioritization (factors in red in Figure 9) are places where art museums should attempt to be less effective. These are areas in which art museums are perceived as doing relatively well, and we recommend current efforts in these areas be maintained.

work together to develop ways of better equipping art museum professionals for improving the entire range of well-being factors, but especially those identified earlier as having the biggest difference between likelihood of improvement and ideal prioritization: helping behaviors, empathy, and self-acceptance.

Figure 10
Well - Being: Ideal Prioritization vs. Ability to Address



Note: The horizontal axis indicates ratings for the degree to which improving each well-being factor should be prioritized (*Not at all important to improve to Very important to improve*), and the vertical axis indicates ratings for how well equipped art museums are for improving each well-being factor (*Not at all equipped to Very well-equipped*). The average response for each well-being factor is indicated by a point. The gray diagonal line represents when ratings for ideal level of priority and ratings for the ability to improve each well-being factor are equal. Well-being factors above the diagonal line are those that respondents believe art museums are adequately prepared to improve; well-being factors below the diagonal line are those that they believe art museums are inadequately prepared to improve.

Conclusion

This project examined how art museum professionals view the aims of art museums and the ability of art museums to impact visitor flourishing. According to our findings, art museum professionals felt that:

- The visitor-focused and community-focused aims of art museums should be more highly prioritized than they currently are, and, of these aims, increasing visitor well-being should be most highly prioritized.
- Among specific flourishing outcomes, art museums should most highly prioritize increasing empathy and helping behaviors and reducing closed-mindedness and social disconnect.
- Art museums are under equipped to address flourishing outcomes in visitors.

These findings underscore the need to understand the perspectives of those shaping art museum experiences when developing ways to improve them. One of the striking findings from this project is that art museum professionals felt that improving visitor well-being should be a priority but that art museums are not well equipped to support flourishing outcomes. This underscores the importance of partnerships between art museum professionals and researchers to develop evidence-based programs and other resources that can be implemented within art museums to enhance visitor flourishing.

Acknowledgements

This project and report were made possible with funding from the Chris and Sasha Heinz Family Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Templeton Religion Trust, and the University of Pennsylvania.⁶

Additional Resources

About the Humanities and Human Flourishing Project

The [Humanities and Human Flourishing Project \(HHF\)](#) has been a part of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania since 2014. Founded and directed by James O. Pawelski and involving a growing international and multi-disciplinary network of more than 150 scholars, researchers, and professionals, HHF seeks to explore ways in which the arts and humanities relate to well-being.

HHF situates its work within the field of the *Positive Humanities*, a new field bringing together the arts and humanities with the sciences to understand, assess, and advance the role of culture in human flourishing. HHF has published [foundational conceptual work](#) in this field and edited [the *Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities*](#). For an overview of the Positive Humanities, please see an [introductory chapter](#) from the *Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities* authored by James O. Pawelski.

HHF has been designated a National Endowment for the Arts Research Lab and is engaged in empirical work to understand the role and impact of the arts and humanities in cultivating human flourishing. One of HHF's ongoing research initiatives, [Art Museums: Institutions for Well-Being](#), is examining how and why this form of cultural engagement can enhance well-being by identifying existing museum practices that are well-equipped to impact well-being, and facilitating the development and implementation of new ways of engaging with

⁶The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Chris and Sasha Heinz Family Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts Office of Research & Analysis or the National Endowment for the Arts, the Templeton Religion Trust, or the University of Pennsylvania. The National Endowment for the Arts does not guarantee the accuracy or completeness of the information included in this material and is not responsible for any consequences of its use. This NEA Research Lab is supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts (Award#: 1862782-38-C-20).

art to optimize human flourishing.

Recommended Reading

For additional information on the project discussed here, please see:

Cotter, K. N., Crone, D. L., & Pawelski, J. O. (in press). [Flourishing aims of art museums: A survey of art museum professionals](#). *Empirical Studies of the Arts*.

For additional information about the Positive Humanities, please see:

Tay, L. & Pawelski, J. O. (2022). [The Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities](#)

Visit the [Humanities and Human Flourishing Project](#) website.

For additional information about art museums and flourishing, please see:

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health, and Wellbeing. (2017). [Creative health: The arts for health and wellbeing](#).

Cotter, K.N. & Pawelski, J.O. (2022). [Art museums as institutions for human flourishing](#). *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 17(2), 288-302.

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