

## Straight Up Conversation: Scholar Jay Greene on the Importance of Field Trips - Rick Hess Straight Up

Rick Hess

12-15 minutes

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*Jay Greene, chair of the University of Arkansas department of education reform, has a famously eclectic set of research interests, ranging from school choice to field trips to the effect of schools on civic values. While Jay's school choice scholarship has been cited four times by the U.S. Supreme Court, I'm more intrigued by his ingenious, rigorous research on field trips. Recently, I had the chance to talk with Jay about field trips and why they matter so much for students and schools. Here's what he had to say.*

**Rick Hess:** So, Jay, how did you get into researching field trips, museum visits, and the rest?

**Jay Greene:** In 2011, the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art opened up next door to us in Bentonville, Arkansas. Just before then, they contacted me and noted that it wasn't every day that a major museum opens in an area that never had one, so they wondered whether this might be a good opportunity to do a study and learn something. I brainstormed with my then-students Dan Bowen and Brian Kisida, and we came up with the idea of using a randomized experiment to study the impact of school tours. There was such a rush to open the museum and start the study that we never had time to raise research funds from the museum or anyone else. So Dan, Brian, and I just pulled off that [first study](#) with sweat capital. Since then we've been hooked. I led [another experiment](#) on the effects of field trips [to see live theater](#). Dan and Brian have been studying [field trips to a Holocaust museum](#) in Houston. And I've just started a new experiment to examine the effects of study-abroad trips.

**RH:** You mentioned that you study these topics through randomized experiments. Can you talk a bit about why that matters?

**JG:** In randomized experiments, subjects are randomly assigned to treatment or control conditions. These experiments are important because they give us confidence that any effects observed are causal. In the past, researchers simply didn't use randomized experiments. They take a little ingenuity and a lot of coordination with schools and cultural institutions, but they aren't that hard or that expensive to pull off. The bigger mystery to me is why researchers haven't been doing this type of work all along.

**RH:** Can you sketch the broad strokes of what you've done thus far and a few of the key takeaways from this work?

**JG:** My research team and I have examined what students get out of visiting an art museum or seeing live theater, by measuring outcomes about six to eight weeks after the visit. The findings were fairly consistent. Culturally enriching experiences seem to increase tolerance and empathy. We also see that students absorb a high amount of content knowledge on these field trips. In the theater experiment, for example, students learn the plot and vocabulary of the plays much more fully than if they watch a movie of the same story. Lastly, we find that students have a stronger interest in returning to these cultural institutions in the future. In the Crystal Bridges experiment, for example, we tracked coded coupons that we gave to all participating students and observed that students who visited the art museum on a field trip were significantly more likely to return with their family over the following half year.

**RH:** Intriguing. And just to clarify: When you say that students show increased tolerance and empathy, what does that mean exactly? How do you measure that?

**JG:** We measure tolerance and empathy with survey questions that capture things like whether students are willing to see things from other people's perspectives and accept those differences. Going on a field trip to a cultural institution may affect tolerance and empathy because those cultural activities are like looking through a window into a broader world filled with different people and ideas. Students tend to have very limited exposure to the broader world and so a trip to a museum or theater is a little like travelling around the world.

**RH:** What is it about field trips that increases tolerance and empathy, weeks later? Why might watching a movie or reading a book not have the same impact?

**JG:** There seems to be something very important about in-person experiences for producing these effects. For example, we randomly assigned students to see a play of *Twelfth Night*, to watch a movie version of that story, or to serve in a control group. Seeing the play live increased student Social Perspective Taking—one of the survey scales we used to measure tolerance and empathy—while watching a movie did not. We seem to connect to people and experiences that are right in front of us in ways that we don't if they are portrayed digitally or in a book. Given how much we are shifting to a diet of digital information and experiences, this could have important implications. We might need to make sure that we reserve time for in-person experiences.

**RH:** To your mind, what are the most interesting findings here?

**JG:** The most surprising thing to me is that we are finding any effects at all. The truth is that it's remarkably hard for survey questions to capture the types of benefits that these cultural experiences may produce. I'm confident that we are at best capturing a small fraction of what these kinds of experiences may do for students. Finding any effects at all should help persuade school leaders and policymakers that these out of school activities can be a valuable use of time.

**RH:** What's the relationship between what you're studying and academic success? In other words, if someone accepts the case you're making for field trips, are you also suggesting that there are benefits here in terms of conventional academic outcomes?

**JG:** In the Woodruff Arts Center experiment we actually found an increase in math and reading test scores for students who went on multiple field trips after the first year of the experiment. I'm not sure I fully believe that result given that it is simply implausible that students learned significantly more math and reading when they saw a play, visited an art museum, and heard the symphony. My only explanation for the test score increase, if it is not a fluke, is that test results are partly a reflection of what students know, but also partly a reflection of their motivation to acquire that knowledge and to show it to us on a test. Feeding students a steady diet of math and reading test drills may not nurture student motivation to learn as well as these enriching activities. And as Core Knowledge proponents have long emphasized, students become more advanced readers by having more content knowledge and knowledge about the world. Field trips clearly provide that.

**RH:** Speaking of math and reading scores: Field trips and arts instruction have been cut back a lot in the accountability era. And yet your research highlights the *value* of these programs. I could imagine that some might view your work as an implicit critique of accountability and its emphasis on boosting reading and math scores. Is that fair? And how would you respond to the argument that math and reading performance needs to be given priority?

**JG:** Actually, Rick, I don't think my critique of the narrow focus on math and reading scores has been all that implicit. Part of my motivation for this research is to see if we can demonstrate the benefits of a variety of traditional school activities that have been squeezed out by the technocratic enterprise of trying to steer schools primarily on the basis of math and reading test scores. The cruel irony of the narrow focus on math and reading scores is that schools have figured out how to move those scores without necessarily changing the kinds of later life outcomes for students that really matter—like going further in school, completing a degree, and enjoying a

rewarding job. As a conservative at heart, I begin with the assumption that traditional practices probably exist for a reason. If schools have traditionally taught students a variety of subjects and taken them on field trips to enjoy a variety of enriching activities, they probably had reasons for doing so. Traditional practices capture the preferences of most parents and educators and, I suspect, are far more likely to be effective than the brave new worlds imagined by a small number of very smart social scientists.

**RH:** On that note, how has your work been received by parents and educators? And how about by those who specialize in things like field trips and arts education?

**JG:** The response has been very enthusiastic from parents, educators, and people involved in cultural institutions. The only people who don't seem to care very much are the small and highly insular group of folks in education reform. The foundations that fund education reform have expressed practically no interest in supporting this type of research. And education policy researchers and advocates sometimes express curious amazement at what we are doing, but none have altered their agendas to focus on these out of school learning activities.

**RH:** Funders haven't expressed much interest? Why do you think that is?

**JG:** Most of the education reform foundations have a strong technocratic tilt. So, despite rhetorical commitments to the arts and broadening measures of student success, they just can't wean themselves from a narrow focus on math and reading scores. This problem is not helped by the fact that many of the big foundations derive their wealth from technology, inclining them toward technocracy and away from art and culture. But most importantly, big foundations can be thought of as political organizations and the people who work in them survive and thrive by sharing in a groupthink culture. If you step out of the herd and fail, you are doomed; but, if you fail all together with the group, you are protected to move on to the next groupthink and try again.

**RH:** Besides the reception from funders, what are a couple of things that haven't gone as well as you would've liked? What kind of hurdles have you confronted?

**JG:** I can't even begin to list the things that have gone wrong during these experiments. We had a school come to see a play only to discover that the actors were told a different performance time. We've had performances cancelled by snowstorms. We've shown up at schools to administer surveys only to discover that no one was expecting us. We've had schools complain about nudity in the art museum and refuse to participate. Everything that can go wrong, has. The only wisdom I have acquired from these failures is to make sure that the cultural institution with whom we are partnering understands that things will go wrong and that our shared commitment to the research project can help us endure with good humor. We've also learned that the research team cannot delegate the lottery or data collection to others. Cultural institutions don't necessarily understand what "random" actually means; and asking teachers to administer surveys turns out to be a horrible idea. If we want things done a certain way, we have to do them ourselves. However, there has been an upside to being a control-freak, which is that I've been able to spend a ton of time in schools over the last several years. I confess that I used to think I could learn more about schools by staring at numbers in a spreadsheet than by spending a lot of time in them. I now know how wrong I was.

**RH:** Given everything you've learned so far, what's next?

**JG:** Thus far we've only been able to look at the relatively short-term effects of a single cultural experience. It would be helpful to see if there are lasting effects, which could only realistically be produced by students having multiple experiences. To that end, I've partnered with the Woodruff Arts Center in Atlanta and received support from the National Endowment for the Arts to randomly assign students to multiple field trips per year and then track effects over longer periods of time. We're in the early stages of that experiment right now. I've also just started a longer-term study of multiple field trips to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. And we are about to start a randomized experiment of a study abroad course that is built around a 10 day trip to Israel. If visiting a museum or seeing a play is "broadening," I'd like to see what happens when students actually travel.

**RH:** Last question: Do you have any advice for parents, teachers, and schools as they think about the role of field

trips and the arts?

**JG:** My main advice to parents, teachers, and schools is that they shouldn't doubt their own experiences and preferences about how students should be educated. Researchers can help on the margins, but families, educators, and communities who are committed to a broad education that includes the arts and out of school learning should continue to pursue those activities even if leaders backed by "research" demand that they alter their priorities.