

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Toilet-Scrubbing Boomers?

Diane Ragsdale · Thursday, June 30th, 2011

☒ In last week's post, I asked whether the nonprofit art sector in the US constitutes 'good work' from the perspective of the artists and staffers working therein. The paragraph on 'scrubbing toilets' sparked quite a bit of attention and stimulated several comments on succession planning. While succession planning (or the lack of it) in the nonprofit arts sector was not the solution (problem) I was aiming at in my first post, it's a compelling topic, so I thought I'd share a few thoughts.

In 2005, Jerry Yoshitomi and I co-moderated a panel session at a Grantmakers in the Arts conference called *Bye Bye Boomer (Hello Retirement); or Is It Time to 'Retire Retirement'*? In advance of the session we created a little survey and polled our friends and contacts. It was informal and non-scientific. We just wanted to use the responses to help stimulate a conversation at the session. We had an equal number of Boomers and those younger than Boomers take the survey. Here's my recollection of the gist of the more memorable (read: hostile, moving, or passionate) responses from our convenience survey:

Boomers reflected that they had worked hard to achieve their positions (and decent salaries, finally!) and resented feeling compelled to move along just because others coming up were eager to take over and they were nearing official 'retirement age'. Additionally, almost none of them could afford to retire (having no pensions or savings from years of low- or no-paying nonprofit work). Many were put off by unwilling-to-pay-their-dues young upstarts expecting decent salaries and top posts straight out of college and to work bankers' hours.

Younger respondents resented that they were stuck with useless degrees and loans to pay off and that they had few options, none of them appealing: (1) start your own small (and unlikely to become large) company that pays nothing (hard to do when you have \$60,000 in student loans to pay off); (2) work day and night for low wages in an established institution and hang out for a couple decades in the hope that you will eventually be promoted; or (3) take over an organization that's been driven into the ground and spend years trying to 'fix' the institution without 'changing it' and thereby offending the board, funders, donors, and current patrons.

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