

Signature Work Portfolio

Reflection on the Common Good at UST

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May 14th, 2022

### **How I Have Utilized the Common Good in Different Projects at UST**

At the University of St. Thomas, I am constantly reminded of the “Common Good”, the University’s ideology that centers around being the best we can be for ourselves, community, and the world. St. Thomas describes the Common Good as educating “students to be morally responsible leaders who think critically, act wisely and work skillfully to advance the common good.” To be constantly reminded of it means to always have greatness expected of me in every course I have taken here. Whether that be a Mathematics course or a Philosophy course, the goal is still the same. It is nearly impossible to travel through St. Thomas’ campus without seeing at least a dozen posters about the Common Good and suggestions on how to align ourselves with it. But what does that look like in different courses? Throughout the various courses I have taken at St. Thomas, I have done a myriad of projects and essays. In this essay, I will review a couple of past projects and highlight how I believe they connect to St. Thomas’ Common Good and other values.

Starting off, I will discuss the project done in my Art History course. I took this course in the Fall of 2019 (the last 'normal' semester before COVID hit), and it was my very first formal art-related course I had taken since Middle School. In the course we talked about many tragic historical events such as Apartheid in South Africa and even the Holocaust. I had already learned about the majority of the events in past classes, but this course was a bit different. We took the time to study art from these events, learning so much more about the people affected by them - sometimes even very personal details about the artists themselves. This was unlike most of the other courses I had taken before and it stuck with me after the course had concluded. However, this depth and thoroughness of historical analysis remained consistent through some of the projects we did in the course, one of which will be discussed in this essay.

Myself and a partner studied the life and work of a man named Dennis Oppenheim. An incredible artist, he did many different pieces that included using existing nature (cut huge ice circles in a flowing river) and even an 25 foot tall upside down imitation church building. However, I do not believe the contents of the project to relate to the Common Good as much as the process of researching Dennis Oppenheim does. Dennis Oppenheim was born in the 1930s and died in the early 2010s, so he had a lot of time to create many pieces of art and create a name for himself. With that comes the fact that many people decided to write about his life, some good, some bad. When my partner and I began our research on Dennis Oppenheim, it was important to carefully vet the sources for bias and truth. Part of the Common Good is to "think critically". This includes carefully considering sources from both sides of an argument, and not allowing ourselves to be biased whenever possible. So, for this project, my partner and I spent much time sifting through dozens of articles, papers, and books to collect pieces of information

we thought to be accurate. It was a time-consuming process, but we felt that it was necessary in order to have accurate information on our research topic. During this project I learned much about the critical thinking processes involved in research and even better developed my existing skills to find and present information on my topic. This helped me greatly once I started my other courses, especially my computer science ones.

Computer Science can sometimes be difficult to relate to the Common Good. When we hear terms like “critical thinking” or “acting wisely” it can be hard to imagine that being done in courses that focus on things like math, true/false, and code. However, after taking my Computer Science courses I have seen numerous ways to include these. For instance, in my Web Development course. Web Sites are everywhere - any page you visit has a landing page that is displaying information to the viewer. These sites can have just about anything, and sometimes the way it is displayed can change the opinion of the viewer. Essentially, this is another spot for biases to exist. Similar to art, Computer Science can be used for good and bad. A website can be used to display good and bad information, or to bring attention to a topic. In this Web Development course, we created a web application to display crimes from the St. Paul area. This included over 300,000+ unique crime incidents in a database we were given. Our project was to display this data on a map of the city and allow for filtering of specific crime types and locations.

When we completed the project, it was easy to see (using the tools we created) which neighborhoods had extreme troubles with crime. Some of the neighborhoods we analyzed had a much higher frequency of violent crimes, so it was easy to form opinions in our heads about these places. For example, if I viewed one of the higher crime neighborhoods on the map and

saw the crime statistics, I would likely write it off as a “bad neighborhood”, purely based on numbers I could see on my screen. Some of these neighborhoods I had only been in a few times in my life, yet it was easy to make assumptions based off some data I had access to. After considering this problem, I thought about it in the lens of the Common Good. It was important to think critically about each of the neighborhoods, and not judge based on my data. It is easy to disassociate statistics from the people that make them up, but it is vitally important to remember that each number is a real person and a real experience that happened. This is an important idea that I considered on a different project as well.

Another project in my Web Development course was a project on natural resource consumption in all 50 states. Similar to the crime web application mentioned earlier, we were given access to a truly enormous database with consumption statistics for each state. We had access to different resource consumptions based on year, resource, and state. This was an interesting project to think about bias because the statistics were pulled right from state databases and were fairly objective. If a state consumed  $x$  amount of coal in a year, then that is how much they consumed. There were not too many ways to think about it. However, what stuck out to me the most about the project was the interpretations of the data we modeled. A person could look at a downward trend of a state’s use of coal as a good thing, or they could view it as a bad thing. While the data was objective, the way it was presented is not.

When it comes to data, and especially graphs containing data, it can be quite easy to mislead when it comes to the presentation of the graph. Even something as simple as

manipulating the scale of the axes can dramatically change how the graph is viewed. This was an issue we came across in this project. We had a large amount of data that needed to be graphed and also needed to ensure that it was being truthfully displayed. Prior to this project, I had not really experienced this problem before. This can relate to the Common Good because it is important that we conduct ourselves honestly when it comes to presenting field data, even when it seems difficult to do so. This also encompasses part of the Common Good that says to “act wisely and work skillfully.” Although it was a lot of work to do so (because some of our data points would range from a value of a couple hundred to a few million), it would be worth it to do so.

Overall, in my courses at the University of St. Thomas I have learned much in the spirit of the Common Good. Acting wisely and honestly has been a core part of each course I have taken. This has included many different course contexts such as Art, Computer Science, English, Spanish, and Math. Each of these courses has contained a unique lesson about the Common Good and what it might have to do in each of these fields. Here in this essay, I highlighted just a couple examples from my academic career here. In a few weeks, I will be graduating from the University of St. Thomas but I will always carry the unique lessons I learned here and I will always try to act with the Common Good in mind.