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Turning into the wind: COVID-19 as a catalyst for creativity in higher education

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Abstract
In this short essay, the author addresses challenges facing higher education in the COVID-19 era and how creativity may serve to transform its future.

Keywords: creativity, higher education, COVID-19, teaching, learning

It seems that a perfect storm has been brewing in American higher education over the past decade. Institutions have seen peak enrollments, hired additional administrative staff, and built bigger and more opulent residence halls, recreation facilities, and campus venues to enhance students' college experience. Yet at the same time many campuses were busily expanding, population statistics pointed toward an inevitable downward trend of high school graduates available to enroll in postsecondary programs in the near future—the future in which we now find ourselves. Realizing that this downturn was drawing near, many universities launched efforts to augment admissions by recruiting international students and creating new certificate, graduate, and adult education programs. Such stopgap measures often proved disappointing, however, since overseas governments reduced funding, and many working adults were (and are) still struggling to make ends meet from a turbulent economy. Battling plummeting enrollments, increasingly aggressive admissions tactics to compete for students, and decreasing government

support, administrators frequently found themselves forced to make major changes. Some announced significant budget cuts, some chose to merge their institutions, and some had to shutter their schools altogether. As if those challenges were not enough to occupy professionals working in higher education, COVID-19 would magnify the trials exponentially. In the early months of 2020, as word spread about the highly contagious virus, campus leaders were thrust into circumstances that required urgent action, not the usual steady, measured pace of the academy. Suddenly, universities became more "human" than ever before—students witnessed top university officials shrugging their shoulders and asking for patience as they frantically went about seeking information and making decisions. News and plans shifted, sometimes drastically, often daily (if not hourly). Across institutional types and regions, anxiety and confusion were widespread, communication was vague, and everyone was looking to each other for answers that did not exist. After all, how many times has this unique constellation of issues plagued higher education?

Although many might lament the current state of disarray in countless college contexts, as a former university administrator and current higher education program faculty member whose research centers on creativity and human development, I take a slightly different view. Could this be the moment for which educators have been waiting to catalyze much-needed change in higher education? What if we shifted our focus to the *opportunities* that reside at the nexus of these challenges?

Creativity: Not just any port in a storm

I have been studying creativity—specifically, how individuals define creativity and what I have come to call one's "creative identity," or how one views one's own creative capacity (Welkener, 2000; 2004; 2011; 2021) for over 25 years. The first college courses I taught were art (often to non-art majors) and I noticed a pattern to my first interactions with students. They were frequently quick to share that they were "not good at this kind of thing," or "not very creative" before we even had a chance to get started. This repeated claim piqued my curiosity; I began to wonder how they must be defining creativity to be so certain that they were outside of its bounds. Interdisciplinary doctoral studies in higher education allowed me to pursue these ideas and for my research to stand at the intersection of creativity, learning, and human development; I quickly discovered that the three are inextricably linked. In fact, Maslow, known for his psychological work on human needs, is quoted as saying (as cited

in Dacey & Lennon, 1998), "the concept of creativeness and the concept of the healthy, self-actualizing, fully human person seem to be coming closer and closer together, and may perhaps turn out to be the same thing" (p. 137).

However, while countless university, corporate, and other organizational mission statements proudly place creativity at the top of their priorities, many researchers and educators suggest that we are losing ground when it comes to developing individuals' creative acumen by the time they leave our educational institutions (Bronson & Merryman, 2010; IBM Global Business Services, 2012; Kim, 2011; Robinson, 2011; Welkener, 2004). Trends commonly point toward a decline in creative disposition and performance over time, age, and schooling. Clearly, there is a disconnect between organizations' aspirations and outcomes when individuals have lost, rather than gained, confidence in their creative potential.

The span of my qualitative research with college students, faculty, and administrators in the U.S. and Europe has consistently shown that one's creative identity is shaped early and externally, by important others' influence (Welkener, 2000; 2021). Thus, those significant people, the context of their exchanges, and the expectations of creativity (explicit and implicit) embedded in their experiences have lingering impact. Holly, an American undergraduate student in my original dissertation study (Welkener, 2000) who rated herself low in creativity (three on a 10-point scale where 10 was considered highly creative), provides a powerful example. When asked how she arrived at this assessment of her creative identity, she very easily pointed to a specific encounter with her third grade art teacher—her recall of the situation was stunning in its vivid detail given that it would have taken place over a dozen years prior to our conversation. She remembered how proud she was of a unique spaceship drawing she was making when her teacher came over to inspect the work. Her delight was quickly deflated when the teacher said "what is *that*?" and told her that what she was producing was incorrect; that it should not "look like that at all." Holly identified that as the defining moment that shaped her creative self-view, one that she never questioned again until sitting with me for our research interview. While her story is perhaps an extreme case, research participants from various inquiries I have conducted over the years have named teachers, family members, and friends who helped to define their creative identities (for better or for worse). Especially in examples from the U.S., as students moved from

high school into college, they frequently reported abandoning creative risk-taking in order to satisfy the teacher and "get the grade," feeling that creativity was viewed as less "professional" or not as "intellectual" as they advanced in their careers. While many did not feel creatively encouraged in post-secondary schooling contexts, those in arts-related fields had the opposite experience since expectations for creativity were emphasized as essential to their discipline(s). Those students reported being regularly challenged to develop their creative capacity, and were able to find some success given the support to do so. An interesting difference between narratives from my American and European participants (Welkener, 2021) has been in the different ways that the arts appear to be identified and integrated into everyday life, or normalized, by the culture. While both American and European respondents commonly associated being creative with being artistic in some fashion, the American meaning of "art" and "artist" seems to restrict who can acknowledge their creative capabilities. In contrast, European culture embraces a more inclusive use of the terms; consequently, individuals may be more likely to define themselves as having some "artistic" or creative competence.

Solutions and resolutions: Ways to soar

Clearly, findings that suggest some individuals do not feel capable of creative contributions are problematic, particularly at a time when it could be argued that the "ability to solve problems, especially new and unique ones…[is a] critical competency for the twenty-first century" (Beghetto & Plucker, 2016, p. 85). However, perhaps this particular point in history, when the world is experiencing more conflict and uncertainty than ever before, is precisely when we can make the changes needed to bolster individuals' creative identities. After all, humans do not tend to develop when they are content; it is when we are in the midst of discomfort and questioning what we think we know that true growth occurs (Kegan, 1994). COVID-19 and other present-day challenges such as racial tensions, political divides, and economic disparities offer "ill-structured problems" (King & Kitchener, 1994)— dilemmas that do not have simple solutions. Developmental educators often employ such problematizing methods in their teaching to invite students into a rich dialogue about possibilities; indeed it can be empowering for learners to consider that there are no clear answers, and myriad perspectives could be acceptable, even celebrated. When trials are great, risk-taking may seem less daunting and rewards appear more attainable. Viewed in this way, the

difficulties, rather than being paralyzing, can act as a propellant toward new assumptions, new methods, new solutions, In other words, creative identities can be given space to flourish if given the proper scaffolding. Higher education is uniquely situated to facilitate this transformation for its constituents, as well as potentially benefit by being changed in the process itself.

For instance, consider the developmental growth that could come from students watching their mentors wrestle with vexing problems such as those the pandemic has wrought; or better yet, being invited into "learning partnerships" (Baxter Magolda, 2012) in the intentional design of complex solutions. Imagine the widespread impact of work performed by faculty, staff, and students from various fields if universities turned their attention to addressing the most pressing needs of the time; if each assignment in each class aimed at using the content of the course to tackle tangible human concerns in need of resolution, no matter how large or small. Students and faculty alike would be able to model and learn how to exercise creativity in all kinds of disciplines, contesting the notion that it is only for the arts.

The university community has already shown promise in coming together around the online delivery of curricula and services. When students were sent home to study as COVID-19 first made its way across the country, faculty and staff worked together (across disciplines and even institutions) to move courses, programs, and events online within a matter of days, a herculean feat. Social media served as a platform for swiftly sharing strategies and support, a practice that is continuing as weeks of experience with distance learning stretch into months and new modalities settle in as permanent features in higher education. Creativity can be found at every turn, especially as individuals reach the limits of technological tools available to them and are forced to find new ways to accomplish learning objectives.

When I think about the ever-changing, stormy higher education landscape produced by COVID-19 and other circumstances of late, I am reminded of a quote attributed to Henry Ford, that "when everything seems to be going against you, remember that the airplane takes off against the wind, not with it." While it seems counterintuitive to those of us not trained in aeronautics, in order for a plane to have the necessary "lift" to leave the ground, it faces *into* the wind. It has been quite a while since the American college/university system has seen significant transformation. Then again, for many years it has not endured momentous

hardships, nor benefited from the creative triumph that emerges from the process. Perhaps now is the time for higher education to turn into the wind in order to create the proper conditions to soar creative heights.

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