

A Vocation of the Imagination

Creating the Creative Campus

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Innovation is a touchstone of American identity. We trust in our creative powers. We define ourselves as explorers. We have built intercontinental railroads and ocean-linking canals, sent men to the moon and created the microchip. If we are confronted by disease, we expect to find the cure. If we need a solution to a problem, we invent it.

Part of our confidence is based in our democratic traditions. Our freedom of expression is enshrined in the First Amendment. Our amalgam of many peoples broadened the reach of our imaginations. Perhaps because we are a nation of nations, in Walt Whitman's phrase, we are also a nation of creators. The Library of Congress reports that in 2003, Americans registered more than 530,000 copyrights for music, art, manuscripts and software. The U.S. Patent Office received more than 365,000 applications for patents.

Looking from our past to the future, we must ask some pressing questions. Is our faith in our creativity substantiated? Is it a talent that only some possess or is it a set of perceptions and skills that can be taught? Are we recognizing and supporting creativity in our schools and society? Or are we slowly starving it by not nurturing our young people's creative capacities, by not rewarding exploration and innovation as a result of scarce support for the arts and scientific research? What is the role of colleges and universities in answering these questions and encouraging the next generation of American innovators?

The Library of Congress reports that in 2003, Americans registered more than 530,000 copyrights for music, art, manuscripts and software.

Recognizing the public benefits of higher education and the arts, the American Assembly of Columbia University convened a 2004 conference called "The Creative Campus," from which important recommendations emerged about better integrating arts offerings on campus into the curriculum, serving the surrounding community and preparing students for the demands of arts careers.

After that conference, then-Princeton sociologist Steven Tepper, who served with me on the conference advisory group, published an article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* acknowledging that "creativity



abounds on campuses," but perhaps "in spite of our policies." Noting that we live in a "scorecard society," Tepper proposed a Creativity Index to measure what he identified as the five elements that encourage the creative process: collaboration, cross-cultural experiences, interdisciplinary exchange, time and resources, and a climate that tolerates failure.

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My view is that the "creative campus" must be thought of at a more profound level than as a place that supports the arts. Higher education talks about creativity but is not willing to face how its very institutional structures and measurements often work against the conditions in which creativity flourishes. The order needed to define course sequences, confer credits and fulfill majors at many institutions may not respond well to challenges from students or faculty who want to range across disciplines, receive credit for independent and creative work or define their concentrations of study differently.

In his 1952 introduction to *The Creative Process*, University of Utah professor and poet Brewster Ghiselin observed that "every creative act overpasses the established order in some way," and "is likely at first to appear eccentric." In an educational system that prizes high retention and completion rates, what room is there for eccentricity? It is possible that institutions have become so consumed with quantifying success that they will discourage hard-to-measure qualities like "unquenchable curiosity" and "fierce determination," the vital elements that University of Chicago psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi identified in *Creativity*, his study of innovative individuals.

For Ghiselin, the inventor is "drawn by the unrealized towards realization. His job is, as Wordsworth says, 'widening the sphere of human sensibility... the introduction of a new element into the intellectual universe.'" What is required of the choreographer making a dance or the scientist conducting an experiment is an openness of mind, an acute attention and a "surrender" to the "widest and freest ranging of the mind." However, to complete this process, "what is needed is control and direction," Ghiselin reminds us.

The institution that would foster creativity is called upon to do many things: provide access to a broad

range of knowledge that contains the seeds of its own expansion; encourage the flow of curiosity across disciplines; and give the creator the discipline and craft to make the barely glimpsed idea visible.

Institutions should not be so consumed with measurements that they do not allow for the unstructured time necessary for discovery and experimentation—to link previously unrelated elements, recognize emerging patterns and take risks—all so essential to creativity. In addition to developing new measures of creativity, colleges should also pay more attention to qualitative assessment, such as portfolios, poster sessions, presentations and performances.

The myth of the lonely creator must yield to the understanding that creativity is a group activity, informed by past ideas, expressions and even failures. It thrives on collaboration. Without collaborators or witnesses, creativity never emerges to do its influential work. Again, college plays a key role for such discoverers. “This is the period when they found their voice,” according to Csikszentmihalyi. “College provided soul mates and teachers who were able to appreciate their uniqueness.”

To support this process, we faculty and administrators must see creativity as a value and steep ourselves in its theory and tools. We must not only teach students how to think, but also how to think about thinking. We must be wise enough to know when to reward

the creative perception and also know when to challenge it; when to urge more freedom of thought and when to demand more discipline. We must develop a pedagogy of creativity.

Stimulated by Richard L. Florida’s book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, college leaders readily talk about preparing students for the creative economy as knowledge workers. However, colleges and universities, responding to students’ anxieties about finding jobs after graduation, run the risk of narrowing their students’ exploration of knowledge and training for existing conditions. There is room for creativity even in this goal. Reassuring an anxious parent about a liberal arts education, one Marlboro College graduate said recently: “We don’t get jobs, we create jobs.”

The vocation we prepare liberal arts students for is one of the imagination. In addition to supplying the newest scientific and artistic breakthroughs, encouraging creativity will cultivate students’ abilities to engage in the kind of thoughtful, compassionate and problem-solving democratic process on which our nation thrives.

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