

# InnerSpark

A Creative Summer School  
and Artistic Community for  
With Visual Arts Talents

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## InnerSpark Background

InnerSpark is a residential summer arts training program for high school students established by the California State Legislature (California Education Code sections 8950-8957) in order to make it possible for “artistically gifted and talented students, broadly representative of the socioeconomic and ethnic diversity of the state, to receive intensive training in the arts through a multidisciplinary program” (InnerSpark, 2008a, para. 3). Students who attend InnerSpark participate in a program focusing on one of the following arts: visual art, animation, creative writing, dance, film- and video-making, music, or theater. InnerSpark has taken place

every summer since 1987, usually on the college campus of the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in Valencia, CA. InnerSpark is a highly selective program. Typically, each year more than 1,500 students apply, and approximately one third of the applicant pool is accepted. Admissions decisions are made without regard to the student’s ability to pay. InnerSpark is supported by public and private funding, and scholarships are provided to those who need them.

## Visual Arts Program

Historically, the visual arts program is the largest of InnerSpark’s seven programs and includes approximately one

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**Figure drawing class.**

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*



**Painting class.**

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*



**Sculpture class.**

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*

third of the student body. Students apply to the visual arts program by submitting three original artworks and two letters of recommendation, and are selected on the basis of their apparent potential for professional development. Although the demographic characteristics of the visual arts students vary from year to year, in general, about 60% of the visual art students are female and approximately 44% are European American, 17% are Mexican American, 9% are Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% are Multiracial, 1% are African American, and 1% are Native American.<sup>1</sup>

All visual art students at InnerSpark take a class in figure drawing, a class in design, and a seminar titled “Art and Culture,” which includes visits by guest lecturers. Students receive additional training in two of the following media (one of which is designated the primary focus): painting, sculpture, ceramics, printmaking, photography, or digital arts. In these classes, students are given assignments that emphasize “critical thinking and problem-solving, the consideration of historical parallels, and the application of rigorous studio art practices” (InnerSpark, 2008b, para. 1).

The visual arts faculty consists of practicing professional artists and arts educators, most of whom have college teaching experience. Students also receive training from visiting artists who offer special workshops and master classes. Because the summer school typically has been held on the campus of a premier arts college, the students and faculty generally have access to good physical resources, including well-equipped shops and studios, and appropriate display spaces. Interdisciplinary collaboration is encouraged at InnerSpark; for example, you might find students socializing over ice cream in a colorful room displaying printmaking students’ work, with music students improvising to the art, accompanied by sculpture students playing self-created musical instruments (R. Jaffe, personal communication, January 14, 2008).

## **Student Reactions to and Experiences of the Visual Arts Program**

For the past 15 years, students have evaluated various aspects of InnerSpark using exit surveys administered during the last few days of their program. Each year, these exit surveys are collected from about 90% of InnerSpark participants. Based on the responses of 1,609 visual art students who attended InnerSpark/CSSSA (California State Summer School for the Arts) between the years of 1993–2006, we found that the vast majority of InnerSpark visual arts students have been very satisfied with their experience in the program. Approximately 42% of the visual

arts students have described their overall InnerSpark summer experience as “excellent,” 40% as “very good,” 14% as “good,” about 4% as “fair,” and less than .5% as “poor.”

The exit surveys also asked students to describe the program’s impact on various aspects of their artistic development using a 5-point rating scale. Using this scale, 28% of the visual arts students reported that their technical skills “increased greatly” as a result of the InnerSpark program, 57% reported that their skills increased “somewhat,” 14% reported no change, and approximately 1% reported “somewhat” or “greatly” decreased technical skills. Even more strikingly, 54% of the visual arts students reported that their confidence in their ability to improve artistically “increased greatly” during the program, 32% reported that this confidence “increased somewhat,” 13% reported no change, and only about 1% reported “somewhat” or “greatly” decreased confidence in their ability to improve artistically.<sup>2</sup>

Although many factors undoubtedly contribute to InnerSpark’s success, we focus in this article on what we believe are three particularly important features of the InnerSpark experience that foster the students’ artistic and personal growth: environmental conditions that foster creativity, interactions with artist-teachers, and interactions with artistically talented peers.

## Environmental Conditions That Foster Creativity

InnerSpark students are immersed in a creative environment devoted to the teaching and making of art, where they have contact with talented peers, art teachers who are practicing professionals, and renowned guest artists. Guest artists who have visited InnerSpark in the past include installation and environmental artist Lita Albuquerque, conceptual artist Paul Kos, and photojournalist Teun Voeten (R. Jaffe, personal communication, April 28, 2007). In addition, sometimes a “folk artist” or “outsider artist” may be invited to “challenge students’ thinking” (R. Jaffe, personal communication, January 14, 2008). An example of one of these artists is John Abduljaami, a self-taught wood sculptor who used a chainsaw in the process of working with a large piece of wood during the 2006 session. Students were able to observe him and converse with him while he worked outdoors.

A unique aspect of the CalArts campus is that the facilities for all 7 programs—visual art, animation, creative writing, film- and video-making, dance, music, and theater art—are housed in the same building. In the center



**Abduljaami and student.**

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*



**College recruiter and student.**

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*

of this building is a space called the Main Gallery, where the ceiling is two stories high. This area is large enough to accommodate all InnerSpark students sitting on the floor during assemblies, and also is used for other events like the College Fair, which is typically attended by representatives from 30–40 accredited, BFA degree-granting institutions of higher education (R. Jaffe, personal communication, January 14, 2008). Students pass through and mingle in the Main Gallery on a daily basis, such as when crossing from the music wing of the building to

the cafeteria. The Main Gallery also functions as a space in which student and faculty art can be showcased for all to see. For many students, being at InnerSpark provides opportunities to learn new and advanced artistic techniques, because it is a place where they can work in superior facilities and receive supervision in the use of media with which they have had no prior experience. InnerSpark studios are open on weekday evenings and on the weekends, which gives students many opportunities to work on their art outside of class sessions. Furthermore, because the entire focus of the InnerSpark program is on art, students are able to concentrate on their art projects to a greater extent than at home; during the school year, they may often be required to balance multiple responsibilities related to academic, extracurricular, work, or family commitments.

At the end of the summer program, students reflected in their exit surveys about how creating art at InnerSpark differed from creating art at home. Many visual arts students commented on how the quality of their artwork at InnerSpark was of higher quality than their artwork at home, and several interesting explanations were offered. For example, a student describing the factors that helped her to create superior art wrote, “More time, more space, more freedom, more materials, more creative energy around, more feedback.” Similarly, another student expressed, “I feel very inspired here—something about being surrounded by creation, imagination, and those dedicated to expressing those qualities brought out the best in me.” Remarking on how important it was that she had been exposed to new perspectives in art, a student wrote, “The program helped me to expand my horizons as

an artist. Having classes that included material which I hadn’t been exposed to was exciting.” Another student acknowledged that she learned a lot about technique and how to critique:

I came here thinking I knew all the tricks and skills needed in the art world but improved on the ones I already knew and learned that I did not know a whole lot more. . . . I have learned how to be more critical of art and of my own work. . . . I feel like a painter whereas before I just felt like a student.

Many visual art students also mentioned that their work benefited from the availability of high-quality materials and being able to work distraction-free.

Such positive assessments of the InnerSpark program in visual art are not limited to only a few students. According to self-reports gathered in exit surveys at the end of the program,<sup>3</sup> more than 90% of the InnerSpark visual art students have agreed that they had many opportunities to learn and practice new skills, were encouraged to take risks and try new things in their art, had enough space to do their work, and had grown as an artist.

## Interactions With Artist-Teachers

Teachers are an important source of emotional support and technical guidance for adolescents talented in the visual arts (Chin, 2004). Teachers may be especially important in the lives of those artistically talented adolescents who do not come from artistic families—adolescents in these situations are

more likely to have been discovered by teachers who have told them that they are special and who have championed their causes and encouraged them to study art, to participate in contests, to pursue art lessons, to contemplate a life in art. (Gardner, 1980, p. 250)

Having the opportunity to interact with teachers who are professional artists is perhaps the most influential aspect of a young talented artist’s education (Sloane & Sosniak, 1985; Zimmerman, 1992). At InnerSpark, all of the art teachers are professional artists. This is immediately communicated to students during orientation with a slideshow of faculty work; in addition, faculty art is on display in the galleries during the first week. Throughout the session, on weekday evenings or on the weekends, faculty members may be found in the studios working on their own art (R. Jaffe, personal communication, January 3, 2008).

The practicing artist-teachers at InnerSpark can serve as role models and mentors. Mentors can enable students to fulfill their creative and educational potential by offering encouragement to help keep up students’ motivation, and sharing unwritten advice about how to succeed in the field (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Torrance, 1984). Mentoring experiences are more likely to occur at summer programs like InnerSpark when teachers reside on campus (Coleman & Cross, 1993; Riegelman, Wolf, & Press, 1991); at InnerSpark, about half of the art teachers live on campus (R. Jaffe, personal communication, January 14, 2008). Teachers in the visual arts program at InnerSpark are able to get to know their students well in classes that typically are lim-

ited to 16 students. Teaching assistants (TAs) also play an important role. All visual arts classes have at least one TA, a graduate student who may assist with duties such as studio setup and cleanup and offer individualized instruction to students. In fact, in classes requiring complex and/or dangerous processes with which many students are unfamiliar (e.g., wood and metalworking, kiln firing, foundry and casting work), more than one TA may be assigned per studio (R. Jaffe, personal communication, February 15, 2008).

One InnerSpark student had praise for both TAs and teachers:

The facilities were incredible, but the people I met here had an even greater impact on me. I especially felt I benefited from talking with TAs who were students at CalArts or teachers that recently graduated. They could give a perspective I could easily relate to.

Other students commented that “the way the teachers push you to try and try new things really improved my skills . . .” and that “the instructors were helpful in offering critiques and advice for the work.”

On InnerSpark exit surveys,<sup>3</sup> more than 90% of the InnerSpark visual art students have reported that their teachers were responsive to their needs, encouraged them, gave them a lot of individual attention, and cared for them as people.

### Interactions With Artistically Talented Peers

At InnerSpark, students in the visual arts program take classes full-time with each other, work on their art outside of class time in studios alongside other art students, attend guest lectures and performances with one another, eat together in the cafeteria, and share a room with two or three students who are attending other InnerSpark programs. The opportunity to meet, work, and live with artistically talented peers in a setting like InnerSpark can be invaluable to a teenager who is artistically talented. In the words of Kathy Stazer, an art teacher from Belmont High School in Los Angeles:

I cherish InnerSpark. It is a genuine transforming experience for students where they can spend time



Teacher demonstrating drawing to student.

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*



Painting teacher and students.

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*



Sculpture teacher and students.

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*



**Two ceramics students.**

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*

focusing on their passion with other students who feel equally passionate about their art. I see the changes in them when they return to school with a completely different world-view.

One of the primary benefits of attending a summer program like InnerSpark is being able to form friendships with similar peers (Clark & Zimmerman, 2004; McHugh, 2006). These opportunities are especially important for adolescents talented in the visual arts, given that a study of InnerSpark students found that those involved in the visual arts reported spending less time back home with friends who also are involved in the arts than did adolescents involved in the performing arts, such as music (Chin, Harrington, Brafman, & Shook, 1997). This may be due to the fact that although it is common for high schools to have drama clubs, plays, concerts, and talent shows, it is relatively rare for high schools to sponsor art clubs, art competitions, or art showings. In sharp contrast to the situation at a typical high school, where there are relatively small numbers of artistically talented students with whom to interact, visual arts students at InnerSpark have available approximately 160 talented and highly motivated visual arts students who can inspire and support them. For example, a visual art student reported:

My roommate . . . can draw characters much better than I. He draws all the time from many different sources. It inspires me to draw a lot more. Kind of helps me pay more attention in my figure drawing classes and just makes me want to draw more. (Burleson, Leach, & Harrington, 2005, p. 110)



**Peer critique in photography studio.**

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*

Another student commenting on a positive feature of the InnerSpark environment wrote, “The ability to be surrounded by people who loved art and were as passionate about it as me . . . gave me the chance to develop my skills as an artist.”

Although peer critiques rarely occur in high school art classes, peer critiques are used to some extent in all visual arts classes at InnerSpark (R. Jaffe, personal communication, January 14, 2008). A student said she especially enjoyed creating art at InnerSpark because “. . . more people appreciated and motivated me here than they do at home. I think this is a really great environment for artists to exchange and accept both constructive criticism and praise.” InnerSpark classes may provide students with their first experience of peer critiques, which usually play an important role in college-level art education.



**Robot sculpture and students in gallery.**

*Photo by Harris Hartsfield*

The many positive roles played by artistically talented peers at InnerSpark have been reflected in the annual exit surveys in which more than 90% of InnerSpark visual art students<sup>3</sup> have agreed that they: were inspired by other students' skills; watched other students as a way to improve; thought there were enough students who were passionate about their art; liked the energy, inspiration, and stimulation of being around other InnerSpark students; made many good friends; and had friends who were responsive to their personal and emotional needs.

### Fostering a Creative Environment and Artistic Community at Home

Given the special benefits of an artistic community within an intensive summer training at InnerSpark, how can this information be applied to help nurture artistic talent at home during the rest of the year?

#### Providing Environmental Conditions Conducive to Creativity

Talented young artists need time, space, and supplies/equipment to work on their art. Family members can support artistically talented teenagers' artistic activities by respecting the time blocks needed to complete projects or by allowing flexibility for them to work when inspiration strikes. Family members also can help provide places where artistically talented teenagers can do their art and not be interrupted. If home conditions are not ideal for working on art, perhaps a relative or friend who lives nearby would be interested in providing space for artistic activities. Family members and friends also may be able to help find studios and classes where

Family members can support artistically talented teenagers' artistic activities by respecting the time blocks needed to complete projects or by allowing flexibility for them to work when inspiration strikes.

artistically talented students can work on their art. If these are not available locally, and it is not practical for the family to move, then perhaps the talented young artist can take a trip to visit a relative or friend who does live somewhere near advanced training opportunities, art museums and galleries, or art libraries. Students also may wish to investigate the possibility of taking art classes online. Last but not least, Sabol (2006) has found that investing in professional-grade art materials can enable young artists to produce art that is more expressive and of higher quality.

#### Finding Artist-Teachers/Mentors

Parents can seek permission for artistically talented high school students to enroll in college art classes or private studio training. College art programs and art colleges seeking to increase their enrollment may want to consider admitting artistically talented high school students as part-time students. Sabol (2006) points out that art instructors are not the only potential mentors for young artists; other adults in the community who are involved in the visual arts, such as individuals affiliated with art museums, art galler-

ies, and businesses related to art, also can serve as mentors. One possible way to contact some individuals who are artists, or who work in art-related professions, is through their college alumni associations; some graduates may have indicated their interest in being mentors.

#### Connecting With Artistic Peers

High school art teachers and students can work together to sponsor art-oriented extracurricular activities. For example, an InnerSpark student described the activities that she initiated with the support of her high school art teacher:

She helped me get an art club started and, as I was president of it, she and I planned student art shows, field trips, and a sidewalk chalk drawing contest. We made art come out of a school that didn't have any attention for art!

Schools that are in close proximity could have their art clubs collaborate on joint activities, such as cosponsoring talks by guest artists. Parents can encourage their talented adolescent

artist to become friends with other young artists, and for them to do art-oriented activities together. Talented adolescent artists also may enjoy corresponding with other young artists over the Internet. Families with a talented adolescent artist might consider hosting an exchange student from another country who also is a young artist, and the talented adolescent artist could visit a family in another country and learn about the art and culture there.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, youth who possess talent in the visual arts can be assisted with the process of developing their artistic gifts in many ways. If given the opportunity to attend a residential summer training program in the arts like InnerSpark, they will benefit from experiencing 4 weeks of immer-

### Resources

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sion in an artistic community of artist-teachers and artistically talented peers, where they are free to focus on creating art. We also can cultivate artistic community at home by encouraging artistically talented youth to form relationships with artist-teachers and artistic peers, and providing them with environmental conditions conducive to creativity. By taking these steps, we can help talented young artists to fulfill their creative potential, and to make their unique contributions to society. **GCT**

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### End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Percentages do not add up to 100% because ethnic background data are missing for the remaining students (many of whom either declined to state their ethnicity or chose "other").
- <sup>2</sup> A copy of the questions from the exit survey may be obtained from David Harrington at [harring@ucsc.edu](mailto:harring@ucsc.edu).
- <sup>3</sup> These results are based on the responses of 811 visual art students who attended InnerSpark/CSSSA between the years of 1996–2005.