

CREATIVE CAMPUS CAUCUS
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FINAL REPORT



The Curb Center
FOR ART, ENTERPRISE & PUBLIC POLICY
at Vanderbilt

The Creative Campus Caucus

The May 2008 Creative Campus Caucus was generously supported by The Mellon Foundation and was organized by the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy at Vanderbilt. The Caucus was conceived as an opportunity to take stock of the creative campus movement 4 years after the initial American Assembly convening on the relationship between the arts and higher education in the U.S.. What were the major strands of activity that have come to be associated with the “creative campus?” What common themes, challenges and opportunities have emerged? What prospects lay ahead for advancing the promise of a stronger, more vital connection between the arts and higher education?

Participants

The Creative Campus Caucus drew a diverse set of participants, including the following:

- 2 university presidents and one former president
- 2 provosts and 2 deans
- 8 faculty members, including 3 sociologists; 2 professors of theater; a cognitive psychologist; a mathematician; and the director of the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA. Scholars also included an economist and a higher education specialist.
- 1 director of a national arts service organization
- 7 university-based arts leaders, managers, and presenters
- 10 foundation officers representing the Mellon, Teagle, and Ford Foundations
- 1 senior officer from the American Association of Universities.

Design of the Caucus

The meeting was designed to survey a diverse set of activities and perspectives and involved close to 25 short presentations over 5 hours. Presenters were expected to talk more generally about the meaning of their work and its “fit” within their own campuses, rather than program details. Participants were asked to “interrogate and reflect” more than “show and tell.” Throughout the day, scholars presented “research minutes” of current scholarship relevant to the themes of the creative campus. These brief research profiles were intended to give participants a sample of some of the compelling questions that might usefully be asked and answered in the context of understanding the connections between creativity, the arts and the academy. The day concluded with a panel of higher education leaders who spoke about what might be done to sustain the creative campus movement and how the ideas discussed throughout the day fit into larger trends facing universities at the beginning of the 21st century.

General Themes and Reflections

Several key themes emerged from the day’s conversation, including the essential role of “creative campuses” in advancing the mission of universities and colleges; the importance of systemic institutional change and intentional leadership; and reflections on the dialogue and practice around the Creative Campus movement as a whole. We detail these themes below, and follow with comment on future directions for the field leading from the 2008 Creative Campus Caucus.

I. The Role of Art, Creativity and the “Creative Campus” in Higher Education

The Creative Campus is about transforming higher education, not arts advocacy. While acknowledging that universities have a responsibility to promote and support the arts, the Caucus focused instead on the role of the arts in advancing the mission of higher education. Participants reflected on the value that the arts bring to the task of teaching, learning, research, intellectual dialogue, public debate and campus community. Nancy Cantor, Chancellor and President of Syracuse University, noted, “Creative Campus—what it does for the energy level of a campus; what it does for the risk-taking and innovative thinking. Those are obvious things. But even more important is what it does for engaged learning using multiple modalities of discovery, and for the kind of cosmopolitan sensibility that the arts embeds one in...”

Cantor noted the potential of the Creative Campus to address a fundamental question facing higher education leaders: “How to break down boundaries between education, scholarly work and creative production, and public engagement? That sort of classic three-legged stool. How do we institutionally acknowledge that this kind of work [the creative campus] is at once scholarly production, extraordinary learning experiences, and, at its best, breaks the boundaries between campus and community and engages the world?”

Shirley Ann Jackson, President of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, observed, “The answer for us is simple—the world is changing. The challenges that society faces are becoming more complex and the innovators that we are preparing and educating to solve the problems of the 21st century need to be expanded. They need the ability to conceptualize across disciplinary boundaries. They need to interact and be sophisticated across cultural horizons. They need to

be intellectually agile, and they fundamentally need to think and act with both sides of the brain engaged.” Or as Steven Tepper put it, “We have come to believe that art and creativity, media and design, narrative and expressive life are critical solutions for meeting the 21st century challenges facing universities. I will be so bold as to proclaim that this may be the century of the creative campus.”

In summary, the Creative Campus represents a new frontier for the traditional liberal arts—providing educators with a way to engage students in diverse and broad intellectual traditions while emphasizing creative practice, new technologies, community-based learning, and the development of 21st century competencies.

Placing art and creativity at the center of campus life. A major goal of the creative campus movement is to make the arts more central to campus life. Participants used the terms “elevate,” “center,” “amplify,” and “re-position” to describe a vision whereby the arts are considered equal contributors to the university’s core mission of teaching, research and public service. Barry Scherr, Provost of Dartmouth College, noted the central role of arts and creativity in liberal arts education, “The arts are integral to the liberal arts education. Liberal arts are about breadth, but another part of it, is creativity. I see the liberal arts as teaching creativity. Most of the disciplines would regard themselves as being creative in one way or the other, but certainly creativity is at the forefront of the arts.”

Placing art and creativity at the heart of campus life involves repeated, ongoing engagement. Nancy Cantor stated, “...Not one shot performances—real residencies, with real partnerships that will peak over the years. For example, choreographer Liz Lerman is coming back rather than just doing a one-shot commissioning or residency, even if that one shot was long. That she’s coming back I think is very critical. The experience particularly for students then is not an experience of seeing and appreciating, it’s actually much closer to a profound engagement over time, something they will work on and repeatedly come back to and be reminded of. Some of the best studies in psychology are studies that show the very important role that repetition and redundancy play in learning and engagement. I think we often fail to recognize that you have to have long, sustained, repeated engagements. It isn’t just mere exposure that really grabs people and makes a difference.”

Rather than being perceived as “grace notes,” participants urged university leaders to view the arts to be core parts of their agendas, just as science, athletics, liberal education, and student services. Ultimately, this requires recognizing the artistic process as a key way of learning and knowing about the world and viewing the arts as critical bridges for connecting to the diverse array of communities served by universities and colleges.

The artistic process offers an important and underutilized mode of inquiry and discovery. The “artistic process” represents a valid, legitimate and increasingly important mode of discovery. The ways that artists pose questions, use analogy, analyze evidence, formulate hypotheses, incorporate feedback from the environment, and conduct experiments offer students and faculty colleagues with new perspectives, new methodologies, and new leverage on teaching and learning

Several participants discussed the synergies that develop when artists work with scientists, doctors or mathematicians. For example, Dan Rockmore, Professor of Mathematics and

Computer Science at Dartmouth College, described his experience in making a 13-part documentary series on mathematics and mathematics as a creative endeavor, “I have to say that all the mathematicians who engaged in this process were amazed by how interesting it was, how complicated it was, how things that they had taken from granted really needed to be explained to people, it gave them a better understanding of what they do. That was a very powerful experience and continues to be for me.”

People remarked that the artistic process might be a more natural entry point for many students into the methods of research and discovery. Others noted that larger shifts in the economy and the growing presence and prevalence of art and entertainment in our personal and professional lives will make artistic modes of inquiry even more important in the future.

II. Systemic Institutional Change and Intentional Leadership

Systemic change and intentional leadership. The work of innovative campus-based arts leaders requires resources—not just money, but also mandate. Faculty must be receptive to working with resident artists and allowing art to be integrated into the curriculum; facilities must be made available for temporary installations or presentations; arts resources—studios, rehearsal halls—need to be accessible to a wider range of campus constituents; leaders must be prepared to handle difficult dialogues engendered by challenging artistic presentations; faculty must be rewarded for participating in interdisciplinary work; space must be provided for new collaborations; failure must be tolerated; tenure processes must be reexamined; research conducted by faculty artists must be recognized and rewarded; artists must be given enough latitude to explore and become enmeshed in campus life. These fundamental changes take time to discover and implement.

In the words of Nancy Cantor, all of these activities require being more “intentional” about the role of the arts on campus. This requires leadership at the top— from deans, provosts, presidents and trustees. In every case, campuses that have succeeded at integrating and amplifying the arts are places where the top executives “get it.”

The everyday actions of top executives also carry symbolic weight. As a critical counterpoint to this dialogue, one participant asked why it is expected that a university president will attend athletic events but the same expectation does not apply to cultural events.

Sustaining commitment to the Creative Campus requires knowledge, evidence, and rigorous evaluation. Many recognized that transforming the arts on campus will not happen with a single innovations grant or with one great artistic residency. It requires sustained effort and attention by campus leaders. While some wondered and worried about whether such sustained effort and investment was likely, others noted the need to understand the return on creative campus investments.

The 2004 American Assembly called for additional research about the scope and impact of the arts on campus. At the time, Alberta Arthurs noted, “We know less about the arts on campus than we do about any other aspect of academic life – football or French or food preferences or financial aid – all important, but no more important than the arts.”

At the 2008 Creative Campus Caucus, a further call for research was made. Donna Heiland, Vice President of The Teagle Foundation, stated, “There’s a strong case not just for persuading funders to fund the work, but looking internally at what we’re doing... We do need to look for evidence; we need to know when we’re getting it right, and when we still need to strive. And I don’t think that’s a negative to say we haven’t done everything we can, it’s just laying out a map and then passing it forward.”

Work in the creative campus movement is legitimized by the presence of serious scholarship. Leaders desire data that can inform the decisions they make and the programs they develop and are eager to find confirmatory evidence that the arts can add value to learning, discovery and campus life.

Developing leadership capacity: Transforming the role of campus “presenter.” Creative Campus programs are reshaping how campus-based arts presenters conceive of and evaluate their work. In fact, many participants—especially those who received creative campus innovations grants—spoke about how their role on campus had been transformed.

Presenters no longer think of themselves primarily as curators—responsible for presenting excellent and innovative arts programs for member of the campus community. Instead, many describe their work as facilitators, brokers, and catalysts. They no longer measure success by “butts in seats” or the cache of a season’s repertoire. Instead, these arts leader define success as the number of new relationships formed; the activation of new partners; the ability to bring together diverse voices; the formation of new connections with diverse members of the community.

Susie Farr, Director of the Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center at University of Maryland, and a recipient of a Doris Duke Creative Campus grant, highlighted this dramatic change, “Our director of artistic initiatives doesn’t start with, ‘Who’s the artist that I’m going to have on campus?’ She starts with, ‘Who are the participants I want to engage?’” Farr noted that the role of the performing arts center had changed as well—from a place of performance to a learning center, “...To many, performance is the purpose of the performing arts center. Part of our effort is to say we’re actually a leaning center and what happens off stage is as important as what happens on stage.”

Presenters have shifted from repertoires to relationships; from excellence to relevance; from the margins to the center. If a university president was to dream up the position of “campus catalyst,” these arts leaders would represent the ideal candidates. They are free from departmental or disciplinary constraints; they are flexible and adaptable; they can put together and disband resources and partners on a project-by-project basis; and they deploy a medium (the arts) which, at its core, is about communicating across boundaries and which has the capacity to engage people in multiple ways and at multiple levels.

The transformation from campus presenter to campus catalyst is profound.

Campuses are incubators of experimentation in the arts. Similar to basic science, university campuses can be “protective” environments where artists experiment with and advance ideas and techniques that might not otherwise be supported by the market or in the nonprofit sector. People made the argument that new artistic movements, new styles, and art that challenges conventions or existing norms can emerge more easily in a university setting.

On the other hand, universities and colleges labor under the weight of their own conventions, politics, and constraints raising the possibility that the “ideal” of the university as a haven for experimentation might not, in fact, exist in reality (or only exist in certain special contexts).

If universities are to become sites where “truth” is challenged, experimentation is accepted, and diversity is celebrated, they will need to embrace artistic innovation and experimentation as part of their systemic effort toward institutional innovation.

III. Reflections on the Creative Campus “movement”

The future is in our leaders: Activism and commitment. Most broad-based movements, whether in education, the environment or the arts, begin with a core group of “visionaries” – people who deeply believe in change, feel personally invested in the process and are willing to take risks and be among the “first movers” to forge new paths. Throughout the meeting, the commitment and passion of these creative campus “visionaries” was on display. The participants represented some of the most active and innovative campus-based arts leaders in the country. The general feeling in the room – confirmed by discussions during breaks and after the meeting – is that the creative campus movement has tremendous promise. These are impassioned leaders and that “the moment” – the energy and activism around this movement – is, in Alberta Arthurs’ words, “still present.”

It was clear from the participants that they valued the chance to come together; they felt reenergized in their work; and they would like more occasions to meet, share ideas and look for opportunities to broaden the work they are doing. To the extent that the meeting included many of the “core” creative campus stakeholders, it is fair to say this “movement” – if it can be called that – has a very dedicated and talented inner circle who stand ready to continue advocating, investigating, innovating, and communicating the value of placing art and creativity at the center of campus life.

Challenges. There are many challenges that lie ahead for creative campus work. Higher education leaders are intrigued by the idea of the creative campus, they are convinced that creativity might lie at the heart of education reform, they believe that the creative campus brand will help them recruit interesting and talented students and faculty.

That said, there is minimal evidence establishing the value of art and creativity to campuses; little guidance for strategic investment; and general ambiguity about what a “creative campus” actually means. Unquestionably, there has been considerable momentum in the last four years and innovative creative campus programs will likely emerge for years to come. Credible research and sophisticated conversations would carry the creative campus movement further.

Going forward

While meeting participants did not offer a specific list of suggested next steps, the following reflections capture areas for further thought, discussion, and action going forward.

- 1) The Creative Campus is a diverse set of activities represented by an equally diverse set of actors. This is, at present, less of a “movement” and more of a series of independent eddies and streams that reflect the unique resources, opportunities, individuals and webs of relationships in which the respective creative campuses are evolving.
- 2) While pursuing their own individual pathways, leaders involved in Creative Campus initiatives across the country are, in general, looking for more opportunities to meet, share ideas and develop joint approaches to fostering, cultivating, integrating and amplifying the arts and creativity on their campuses.
- 3) To move from “anecdotes to institutional engagement,” leaders need to collectively refine their narrative—the set of compelling arguments—around the Creative Campus. A task force of leaders could carry this forward from the Caucus, linking with institutions such as the American Association of Universities (AAU) and other higher education associations. John Vaughn, Vice President of the AAU noted, “...There are powerful pragmatic arguments that have been talked about... There’s a real story there and I’m trying to figure out a way to capture these elements, get them out more broadly, try to connect some of the other national associations, and help take this moment into a movement.”
- 4) In addition, existing case studies and examples serve as useful anecdotes but have not been collected, analyzed and reported on in a way that provides engaging and generalizable insight and knowledge about what works, what doesn’t, and why.
- 5) There is clearly interest in developing a shared Web site where people can post examples of creative campus programming. While this idea seems enticing and fairly simple to execute at first glance, it is not entirely clear what type of information would be most useful on a Web site; who would maintain it; and how it would be made dynamic enough to sustain repeated visits and remain informative. Considering such challenges and developing such a resource could be advanced by a subgroup of Caucus participants.
- 6) As the Creative Campus “movement” evolves, it should be broadly inclusive. Alison Bernstein, Vice President of Knowledge, Creativity, and Freedom at The Ford Foundation noted, “It’s very important to start with the premise of talent abiding in all communities. ...To make sure that historically black colleges and people in community colleges, and 70% of all of the people who go into American higher education who don’t fit the traditional mold are not left out of this equation.”
- 7) Creative campus leaders need to critically examine the type of art and artist they are nurturing on campus. For example, leaders should examine whether their campuses tend toward “high” or “elite” rather than “grassroots” art, or whether there is a mix of not only well-known artists, but also struggling, emerging artists. Alison Bernstein noted, “A really creative campus makes room for, underwrites, commissions, understands the value of the artist who is not necessarily “the star.”