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The Creative Campus: Time for a 'C' Change

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In the past few years, we've been hearing a lot of talk about fostering creativity, on campus and in society. Some college leaders claim to have found the secret formula, while others ask how to place creativity at the center of campus and academic life. The creative turn in higher education, however, remains only a series of ad hoc experiments.

Still, emerging insights from these experiments, new research about creativity, and changing labor and market forces could tip the efforts into something much more significant in education reform.

The wide-ranging nature of creative-campus initiatives has been particularly striking. While readers often jump to the conclusion that "creative" applies only to the arts, leading programs focus on the creative process that threads through not only art and design, but also engineering, medicine, and the arts and sciences. Experiments might take the shape of a physical space, like Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute's Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center; multidisciplinary problem-focused centers, like Stanford University's d.school or Harvard University's The Lab; or academic programs, like the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor's interdisciplinary creative-process course and Vanderbilt University's Program in Creative Enterprise and Public Leadership.

Many programs tap into recent research suggesting that creativity is not simply a product of personality or individual psychology, but rather is rooted in a set of teachable competencies, which include

idea generation, improvisation, metaphorical and analogical reasoning, divergent thinking that explores many possible solutions, counterfactual reasoning, and synthesis of competing solutions. Creativity also requires an ability to communicate and persuade, and the skills and leadership to apply diverse and specialized expertise.

Developing and refining such capacities seem to be exactly what 21st-century undergraduates want. In a continuing national study of creativity and academic choices among undergraduates, one of us, together with the sociologist Richard Pitt, has found that 84 percent of undergraduates surveyed say creativity is an important or very important skill (compared with 61 percent who say being able to solve quantitative problems is important or very important). As many as 54 percent say pursuing careers that allow them to be creative is important or essential. Other studies have noted the high percentage of students today who express their creativity by designing Web sites and blogs and posting their own music, fiction, or poetry online. With new digital technologies, open-source networks, and a proliferation of highly skilled amateur artists, scientists, designers, and inventors, we are witnessing a renaissance in creativity and culture that universities can ill afford to ignore.

While measuring and quantifying creativity has historically been problematic, the psychologist Robert J. Sternberg's Rainbow Project has developed a creativity test that uses analogies, open-ended stories and pictures, and divergent-thinking tests to measure creativity. It turns out that knowing whether an incoming student is creative is a more reliable predictor of freshman academic success than are more-traditional measures like the SAT or high-school GPA.

Can administrators afford, amid the pressing demands on their funds, to reorganize their colleges around creativity? Can they afford not to?

First, there is a growing consensus that America's economy will be increasingly based on creativity, or what the writer Daniel H. Pink

calls "high touch" and "high concept" skills. Many existing high-tech and white-collar jobs—basic computer programming, accounting, database management, routine scientific work—may be exported abroad in the coming years. To stay competitive, America will need to draw on its ability to tell stories, create visually compelling messages and designs, come up with new ways to organize and synthesize information, and invent programs and businesses to solve complicated social problems or tap emerging markets. Business leaders are demanding those skills. A recent IBM poll of global CEO's ranked creativity as the most important factor for future success. And while there will always be jobs in service industries, many of the highest-paying jobs will be in the creative sector.

Second, students are arriving on campus brimming with creativity and curiosity. They are digitally savvy, highly expressive, and they like to get under the hood and figure stuff out—whether redesigning video games or developing new approaches to fight poverty. They are active learners and problem solvers who demand new ways of learning.

Third, escalating costs of higher education and new competition from for-profit colleges are forcing parents, students, accreditors, and elected officials to ask themselves the "value" question, about what a college education is worth. The notion of a creative campus—where students and faculty members work together, face to face, to solve problems, improvise, and experience new ways of learning—can be an antidote to the increasingly antiquated traditional college.

Reorienting a college around creativity holds promise, but only if the effort is:

Student-focused. The greatest challenge facing many efforts is sustainability. What comes next after a visiting artist departs, a speaker series concludes, an interdisciplinary seminar disbands, grant money dries up? If it is to endure, a creative campus must become a central part of students' learning and living. Vanderbilt's Creative Campus Initiative, for example, is deliberately anchored

across numerous aspects of the student experience: academic programs, extracurricular activities, residence halls, career advising, campuswide competitions, and grants. Ball State University's Center for Creative Inquiry has developed a student-driven "immersive learning" program around creative inquiry and problem solving that has become a key aspect of the university's strategic plan and a defining feature of its brand.

Broadly defined. Recent research on the creativity of undergraduates suggests that there is an entire spectrum of "little 'c'" creativity happening outside studios and labs. Many students forge their creative chops when they are planning events, leading student organizations, working with children, volunteering in the community, engaging in playful conversation with roommates, traveling, or participating in religious activities. Promoting creativity must focus on all those areas. For example, students should be encouraged to produce portfolios in which they assemble and reflect on their creative practices inside and outside the classroom.

Intentional. Build the infrastructure of the creative campus. Being intentional may require changes in deeply held institutional structures, including admissions, teaching, academic credit, and requirements for majors.

Systematic. This is the next step facing us. We need to develop best practices for building creative capacities, and rubrics for measuring and teaching creativity. We need Web sites, interdisciplinary journals, conferences. Some collaborations are already under way. Faculty members at the Five Colleges of Ohio (Denison, Kenyon, Wooster, Ohio Wesleyan, and Oberlin) are working together on a Teagle Foundation grant to develop rubrics for teaching and evaluating creativity. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation sponsored a national meeting in May 2008 that brought college presidents, provosts, and deans together with scholars, arts leaders, and foundation officers to evaluate creative-campus projects and research. Wake Forest University's Program for Creativity and Innovation held a conference on creativity and

innovation in 2009 and is planning a meeting on teaching creativity. International conferences are in the works as well.

The creative-campus movement can learn a great deal from the success of the Writing Across the Curriculum movement, which began in the 1970s and became a systematic reform effort in the early 1990s. It is based on a strong body of scholarship documenting both the process and outcomes of effective writing-improvement programs. A community of practice has emerged from the annual National Writing Across the Curriculum Conference (begun in 1993), several interdisciplinary journals, and the online WAC Clearinghouse.

We believe the 21st century will be the century of the creative campus. But such a sea change requires overcoming skepticism and fragmentation with credible theory, compelling experiments, and rigorous research and assessment.

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