

**Training Artists for the Twenty-first Century
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Steven, thank you for that gracious introduction. Everyone here today is exceedingly grateful to you and the Curb Center for Arts, Enterprise and Public Policy for convening us around such an urgent topic. Most of the schools of the arts represented are engaged in debates, at this very moment, about whom to hire, what to teach and how to teach it. It's a real gift to have a couple of days not only to think about these issues but to be able to benefit from the insights of such an illustrious roster of educators, artists and scholars.

Let me start my remarks with some thoughts about our changing idea about artists with a story from early 20th century. A hundred years ago, Greenwich Village was at the heart of Bohemian life in this country. As the story goes, a group of these Bohemians—the painter John Sloan and iconoclastic artist, Marcel Duchamp among them—chose a chilly winter night in 1917 to break into the doorway on the side of Washington Square Arch, the historic monument that marks the

entrance to Washington Square Park in the Village. Inside the doorway of the arch are 110 steps that lead to the top.

On this particular night, armed with bottles of wine, cap pistols, and paper lanterns, the artists climbed the stairs to the top and spent the night atop the arch, drinking, reading poetry and singing. At dawn, they fired off their toy guns and declared a revolution. After a few “whereas, whereas, whereas,” they proclaimed that they were seceding from NYC and founding “ The Independent Republic of the Village.”

Eventually the police came, convinced them to come down and permanently locked the door to the arch.

I first heard that story as a newly minted dean over twenty years ago. The former President of NYU told it to a group of parents and prospective students who were attending an accepted student event. Over twenty years ago, Parents in the audience clearly got a big kick out of the incident as did their sons and daughters sitting in the audience. The message from the President was clear: Artists, were rebels, defiant, brilliant, heretical, capable of shaking up our view of the status quo.

Back then, parents actually seemed comforted by the fact that their sons and daughters had come to a place where they might finally meet other like-minded souls.

My guess, however, is that if I were to repeat that story to prospective students and their parents at our accepted student event next month, it would be read, as a quaint artifact of another time. I would be speaking to candidates who just endured a rigorous artistic review. Many of the families I will be addressing are considering what it means to them and the futures of their sons and daughters as they weigh an art school degree against the likelihood of incurring a considerable amount of debt. Because of the shadow of debt, parents and students alike want some assurance that after graduation , a BFA or MFA will leave them employable.

A story about paper lanterns and a secession manifesto will no longer be captivating.

The truth is society's idea of an artist has changed radically in the past 100 years or in the past 20 years for that matter, which is why this

conference is so timely. A changing jobs landscape and the growth of the creative economy, for example, suggest the need for curriculum reform and a better understanding of what skills an arts degree develops. These issues are worthy topics for discussion and debate. But as we debate the need for our schools to change, I would like to suggest that schools of the arts have some lessons to teach us as well. This morning I would like to share just a few of these lessons I've learned in my two decades as an art school dean, as a prelude to the conversations we will have over the next two days.

Lesson # 1 begins with the fundamental value of a school of the arts. Art schools are first and foremost, a unique place within our culture where outrageously talented and imaginative individuals go to acquire skills, deepen a work ethic that combines rigor and discipline with risk taking and self-challenge. Art school is where creative men and women can take risks, make mistakes and incubate directions and opportunities no one knew existed.

Art school is a place where an emerging artist can establish, in the words of one of our distinguished alums, “an unmediated relationship

with his or her work.” Unfettered by commercial deals, critics or agents, artists in training, as they master the skills of their craft, gain a connection not only with their work but with their deepest individual self. For one time in their lives they can ignore the priorities of politicians, policy makers and patrons. If graduates are lucky, they leave the school of the arts, not only with real skills and competencies but, if we have succeeded as teachers, with a healthy sense of justifiable self-confidence.

(The head of our graduate acting program, Mark Wing-Davey defines justifiable self-confidence as the opposite of delusional self-confidence).

There may be many other ancillary benefits to attending a school of the art and many ways to use an art school degree, and we will explore them today. But whatever we discover about that broader usefulness, we cannot afford to relinquish the fundamentally unique value, the North Star, of who we are and what we do.

Lesson # 2 is that art schools teach us that the future is often not a simple extrapolation of the present. We spend a lot of time talking about the future at schools of the arts: the future of film, the future of theater, the future of musical theater, the future of the music industry and so on. There is an important distinction to be made, however, between understanding opportunities for change and transformation as opposed to simply calculating the exponential replication of the present. For example, for years, New York City in the early 90's was a wasteland for film and television production. Absolutely nothing was happening in the city. Extrapolating on that fact, savvy industry advisors would come to our school and counsel students to forget about NYC. There are no jobs and, save for a few die hard television shows, few hopes for a job in the industry in NY.

Very few of those savvy advisors forecast the explosion of production in film, television and commercials that now helps fuel the creative economy in NY with thousands of jobs and millions of dollars of tax revenue. Fewer still predicted the boom in high technology jobs that has begun to take place now. Hind sight reveals that the city, since the time of its near collapse in the 1970's, has been seized by an iron will to rebuild and renew. The presence of highly talented, highly

motivated, well trained actors, writers, directors, producers, and new media artists from local schools of the arts was a vital part of the high octane energy of the city. But the savvy industry insiders missed that.

Predicting the future in the arts is a risky venture; we often miss the boat-- completely. If Art school has taught me nothing else, it is that artists are not insiders; they are the consummate outsiders, and as outliers they see the world in way others do not. They are full of unpredictable surprises and subversions. In order for a school of the art to thrive, it needs ample room for those surprises, those fortuitous meetings and the flourishing of unintended consequences.

One of our panels today will look at the changing job landscape and that brings me to [Lesson # 3](#). Most art schools have a panoply of exit strategies: internships, partnerships with professional companies and theaters, workshops, capstone projects, industry nights, career development offices and of course faculty who are themselves working professionals who help bridge their students into professional careers.

But art school has taught me that, increasingly, some of our most creative students, are finding ways to invent jobs we never knew needed to be done

- **Who knew that a little known presidential candidate would need a New Media Director to catapult his visual narrative into the social media arena. Grad Film alumnus, Arun Chaudury, having convinced candidate Obama of that need, then convinced President Obama that the White House really needed its first ever, videographer.**
- **Who knew that training in drama, film and interactive media was great preparation for a wildly successful web-based business? Carly Rony and her spouse, David Liu, parlayed their art school skills into a full service wedding planning, newlyweds and expectant parents businesses.**
- **When Dennis Crowley, an ITP alumnus explained to a group of faculty the logic of the mobile app, Four Square, I could not imagine why anyone would want to know where their friends are at various times of the day. But, given the success of the app, apparently they do.**

We did not predict any of those jobs. We certainly have no courses to teach the skills for those jobs. But what we are beginning to suspect is that there is an aspect of art school that encourages this type of entrepreneurial spirit. It's worth asking ourselves, "how can we become more intentional and deliberate in making our students conscious about the collateral advantages of arts training without diminishing the value of that training in the first place?"

Finally, [lesson # 4](#) . Art School has taught me that there is no one, single way to cultivate effective creative pedagogy. A comparison between two of our most stellar departments is a case in point. One of our finest departments, is an interactive media program in which technology is abundant. At the end of every academic year, the faculty literally deconstruct the entire curriculum. Though their core values remain unchanging—technology serves ideas not the other way around—they question their assumptions about the variables: equipment, facilities, courses offered, and often re-configure their physical space to accommodate change.

They don't believe in sequential training, because they don't believe that learning occurs in sequence. They are singular in the school of the arts for having begun to blend online learning with in class teaching, finding on-line as effective as in person for certain types of learning tasks. They often define student work as problem solving and the problems can be in hospitals, museums, large corporations or small not-for-profits .

By contrast, another department uses virtually no technology at all. Circus arts is one of its foundational courses, and the curriculum is characterized by lock step sequential conservatory training. Each student is measured against a set of clearly defined criteria and measured for how well they collaborate within the ensemble. As different as they may be, the two departments do have some shared attributes: the both value play, improvisation, risk taking and encourage mistakes and collaboration.

A word about collaboration: by collaboration, I don't mean the you help me and I'll help you idea of cooperative reciprocity; rather I am referring to the dictionary definition of collaboration that reads, "to enter into enemy territory." Real collaboration demands that students

who work together fully inhabit the differences of each other and allow those differences to violate their own assumptions about the world. . To really collaborate they need to become familiar with the terrain of someone else’s imagination, build trust and invite others to do the same with them. The bonds that come from real collaboration run deep.

Though very different in their curriculum design and pedagogical approach, both departments exit their students—with justifiable self-confidence-- into productive careers; they cultivate fierce alumni loyalty and experience high percentages of life-long success among their graduates. Their success suggests that for all that we might learn about curriculum design and competencies, there is an ineffable quality about schools of the arts. Trust and intimacy, honesty and openness are as much a part of the learning environment as any skill or competence.

Let me close with a word about change. Much of today’s discussion is devoted to our response to a changing world. There are two changes underway in this country that will have a material impact not just on schools of the arts but on higher education in general. One is a massive shift in demographics and the other is an ever-widening income gap.

On demographics, in ten years, as many of you already know, there will no longer be a majority/minority. In many large urban areas, the reality of that changing demographic is already apparent. What might that demographic shift mean for our schools? How will those changes impact our understanding of expressive vocabularies? How will they influence the way we think of the body or the kinds of performance traditions we teach? How will those new voices, histories and experiences influence our understanding of narrative and storytelling? How will we judge all of this newness? We tend to think more of the way in which diversity requires accommodation on the part of the diverse and less about how it impacts us.

The second change that we confront every admissions season is the growing income inequality in this country. Income inequality is not new news either; but, the separation is greater now than it has ever been. Several years ago, the Jack Cook Kent Foundation published a study about high need, high performing students. The study cited the fact that 25% of high performing, high need students don't even consider going to college. Of those who do apply, few choose highly selective elite schools. These statistics are worse than tragic. Talent is

the core asset of a school of the arts. We can spend every waking hour perfecting curriculum and making the art school degree more marketable, but if we don't lower the barrier to talent and excellence, we jeopardize our most important asset.

We launched an aggressive talent scouting effort to confront that issue for the Tisch School of the Arts. It's our number one funding priority. We identify centers of excellence all over the country—like the New Orleans School of the Arts—and establish a partnership. We depend on them to nominate students for our residential high school programs and for the academic year. Once those students are chosen for Tisch, they become the dean's scholars and enter a program of leadership development and academic support.

Money, income inequality are huge barriers, but they are not the only ones. There are barriers on both sides. On the student side, for example, before they even arrive at the school of the arts,

- It's too difficult or too complicated to even find their way to the auditions or call backs or no one is assisting with that artistic portfolio.**
- Cultural barriers make leaving families difficult to overcome**

- **Even when students receive enough financial aid and make it to a leading conservatory far away from home, sometimes the need to work makes working on a film, or rehearsing for a production nearly impossible.**

But there are also barriers that we erect around ourselves:

- **We bring assumptions into the audition hall that sometimes blind us to the raw talent in front of us.**
- **We hold on to financial aid policies—at least at NYU-- that penalize transfer students, for example, who use transferring as a means to lowering college costs.**
- **We sometimes steel ourselves against cultural traditions unfamiliar to us, closing ourselves off to true collaboration with our diverse students and fully inhabiting the difference in our community.**

If we could make change at that fundamental level, at the level of making art schools paradigms of the embrace of difference, that embrace would be profound; that embrace could be a transformational model for higher education. As schools of the arts, we have the unique tools to become that paradigm. Now that would be a revolution, one worth breaking into Washington Square Arch, climbing the steps—not

with a cap gun this time--but to declare victory. Thank you. Enjoy your day.

Our school still struggles to match our applicant pool and enrollments to those shifting demographics? As we earnestly discuss making changes, inevitably the conversation gets around to criteria and excellence. I have listened to virtually the same arguments about why we cannot improve our demographics for twenty-two years, and it occurs to me that if talent is truly equal opportunity, we need to teach our admissions committees to look more deeply. We have to ask them to inhabit difference more boldly to violate their assumptions and, just

as our interactive media program sheds old ideas, ask admissions to learn a different way of looking and evaluating. The barriers we are seeking to lower may be within ourselves.