

Commencement: Penn State University's College of Arts and Architecture

**Creative Work and the Work of Creativity:
Arts Graduates in a Changing Economy**

May 4, 2013

Steven J. Tepper

Thank you Dean Korner. Graduates, parents, grandparents, faculty. The last time I gave a commencement address was 24 years ago at my own graduation when I was senior class president at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. So, I went back to that speech in preparation for today hoping to find some bit of wisdom from 1989 that I could bring back and share with you today. Well, it turns out that there is not a single thing in that speech that is worth repeating. I didn't have a clue about anything. I hope I can do better today.

Looking back now, my own graduation marked a shift in my relationship to myself, and to others. Until then, with the exception of volunteer work and service, I had mostly been a taker and a collector: collecting praise, collecting course credits, and collecting friends, clothes, experiences, and music. My whole life, I heard people saying, "Son, here is the world; It is yours; Fill your pockets." Now, I heard instead, "Son, here is the World; Empty your Pockets; Add to It; Make the world so big that it will never again fit in your pockets; instead you will have to carry it around clumsily in your arms, sharing it with strangers." Quite a shift.

So Commencement is obviously both the end and the beginning. It is at moments like this, when you need to pick sides. There are two kinds of people in the world: those who see the glass as $\frac{1}{2}$ empty and those who see it as $\frac{1}{2}$ full. There are those who are changing and those who set themselves up as the victims of change; those who walk into a room and say, "Well, here I am;" and those who walk into a room and say "Ah, there you are." Or, as Woody Allen once wisely remarked, "There are those who are good and those who are bad. The good sleep better, but the bad seem to enjoy the waking hours much more."

For me, the world is divided into those who try to make everything fit; who try to tidy up social life; who find comfort in existing solutions; who retreat to tradition and convention. Then there are those who disrupt; who turn things upside down; who court novelty; who embrace the non-routine; who take risks; and who constantly and relentlessly say, "Why this way?" and "Can we do it differently?" By choosing to study the arts, you have declared that you are, by and large, part of the second group. You have committed yourselves to placing creativity at the center of your life and work.

Here is what I would like to do in the minutes remaining. First, I want to help you sleep better at night. I want to tell you why you should stare down the naysayers and declare that your arts degree is an ideal preparation for life. Second, I want to challenge you to use your training to engage your

communities and to solve some of our world's most vexing problems and puzzles.

Creativity is the new black. Welcome to the creative era. To fuel the 21st-century economic engine and sustain democracy, we must unleash and nurture the creative impulse that exists within every one of us. You will need to adapt to rapidly changing and unpredictable global forces; you will be called upon to create new markets, take risks and start new enterprises; and you will have opportunities to produce compelling forms of media, entertainment, and design. In fact, in a recent IBM poll of 1,500 CEO's, creativity was mentioned as the number one leadership competency of the future.

What are the skills that this new creative world requires? Experts say we need graduates who are good at empathic reasoning or the ability to consider the perspectives, emotions and experiences of others; we need people who can think with analogies and who can make remote associations – connecting ideas that might not otherwise seem to go together; we need people who are good at detecting patterns, especially when confronted with information overload; we need graduates who have what I call expressive agility – who can pitch an idea using whatever medium is most effective for the audience at hand; we need people who are tolerant of ambiguity, willing to forge ahead, to audition new ideas, even when the future is uncertain; and we need graduates who are persistent and who understand how to manage complex projects – whether

staging a dance or play; promoting and presenting a concert; designing and planning a new urban corridor. The world needs people who are “plucky”-- who can identify resources, manage collaborators, build audiences, handle failures, and ultimately “make stuff happen.”

Incoming message to those of you wearing funny gowns today: this is the tool kit you are graduating with. Importantly, scholars of creativity have demonstrated that training in the arts hones these skills. We know from brain scans that the parts of your brain that light up when you are doing art are the same parts of the brain required for creative problem solving. We know that work teams that do improvisational theater games together, come up with more ideas in business and science; we know that Nobel Prize winning scientists are 17 times more likely to have training in the arts. 80 percent of scientists recommend that aspiring scientists study the arts. We know that business majors, when they double major in an arts discipline, earn more money than business majors without the arts training.

Moreover, when we survey arts graduates (and, over the past 3 years, I have surveyed more than 75,000 graduates *as part of something called the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project, or SNAAP*), we find that the vast majority says their education helped them become more creative. And, while creativity is certainly taught outside of the arts, arts majors get a far greater dose of it than their peers; Arts majors are 5 times more likely than science majors to say that their courses require them to take assignments

in multiple directions or deal with ambiguity. 80% of arts majors say that creative thinking is regularly emphasized in their coursework; compared to only 3% of biology majors and only 16% of econ and business majors. On the other hand, findings show that arts majors do not like speeches that quote a lot of statistics. So I should stop now, but I can't help myself.

You might be thinking, "Great, we arts graduates are terrific problem solvers. We have a portfolio of skills that the world increasingly values. But then why does Uncle Henry seem so baffled at my choice of major: "A degree in the arts?" He asks. "What are you going to do with that?" "Why didn't you go into something sensible, like Petroleum Engineering." You know what? Uncle Henry has a point. Petroleum Engineers make more money than artists. There is also less competition and more demand, so you can be assured of getting a job out of college. Moreover, research by the National Endowment for the Arts has shown that artists do in fact face a modest wage penalty – they make approximately 12 percent less than comparably educated professionals.

But, here is the kicker; arts graduates are happier. In fact, artists are among the happiest professionals – happier than lawyers, financial managers and high school teachers. Clergy and firefighters are among only a few occupations happier than artists. And how about this: among arts graduates dancers are the least likely to earn more than \$50,000, only 9 percent do. BUT, they are the most satisfied with their jobs – almost 97 percent say they are satisfied. Here is the wisdom I didn't have 24 years ago

– money doesn't buy you happiness. People who earn \$25,000 a year think their happiness will double if they earn \$55,000 – instead it increases a modest 9 percent; and every dollar earned above \$75,000 brings you no additional happiness. On the other hand, researchers have shown conclusively that doing something creative does make you happy. That instinct led you to art school in the first place and can lead you to a satisfying and meaningful life – but only if you keep the Uncle Henry's of the world in their small, dark corners. Legendary Nashville country star, George Jones, who died last week, once said, "Be real about what you do. Stay true to the voice inside you. Don't let the "business" change what it is you love." And, another legendary crooner, Karl Marx, once said, "The artist must earn money in order to be able to live and to create, but he must by no means live and create for the purpose of making money." By the way, if there is an Uncle Henry in the audience today, let me apologize. I am not actually talking about you. I am sure you are a very understanding and supportive uncle.

Ok. So arts graduates have a great set of skills and most use these skills both in the arts and outside of the arts to pursue rewarding careers and lives. But arts graduates, it turns out, are also better prepared for citizenship. Research has demonstrated that creative people are more tolerant of others; more open minded; less ideologically rigid; less punitive toward people they disagree with; and more resilient in the face of change. In short, I would argue, creative people make better citizens. Of course with this comes added responsibility.

I want to be clear about what I see as your unique value in this world. We love your drawings and paintings and poetry; your music, your dance, and your designs. You make the world a more beautiful and humane place; and sometimes a more uncomfortable place. But, that is not enough. You have the capacity and the disposition to help society solve some of its most vexing problems – diabetes, obesity, malaria, environmental degradation, poverty, political dysfunction, school dropout rates, etc. You must be engaged in your world. Dean William Germano, from Cooper Union, provides a great analogy that is relevant to the case I am making. Much scholarly writing, like much art, is like a snow globe – a careful, meticulous, little world—little houses, the Eiffel Tower, tiny snowmen - surrounded by a glass wall that separates the scene within from the viewer outside. The snow globe is built to be admired. With a simple shake you can create a moment of theater, but you walk away and nothing has changed. So, don't spend all of your life making snow globes. Join the legions of artists who are travelling to politically precarious places across the world and are writing and sharing stories and photographs through the online newspaper called *Creative Times*, or take inspiration from Emily Pilloton, who took her architecture and product design training from Berkeley, and moved to Bertie County, North Carolina, the poorest county in the state with the highest school dropout rate, and created a design workshop for high school students to earn up to 17 hours of high school credit designing and building projects to serve their community – from playgrounds, to public chicken coops, to a farmers market. Or follow the inspiration of your own

Pittsburgh Studio, an upper-class landscape architecture practicum led by Professor Ken Tamminga that takes students into down and out urban neighborhoods to spark community revitalization efforts through design. Or, start difficult conversations in your community. Follow the example of the College of Art and Architecture's powerful Cultural Conversations Festival, this year featuring new plays, choral performances, and student films exploring the issues of sexual assault and abuse.

In conclusion, your creativity can either be the force that drives your life; or you can hide it under a bushel. Many of you will become lawyers and doctors, social workers, managers and public relations specialist. Many of you will become parents, coaches and teachers. But, not all of you will take your creativity with you into these other professions and areas of your life. Perhaps you see yourself as creative when you are in the studio or the performance hall or the theater, but not when you are in biology class or when you are working at the soup kitchen. You should never see your creativity as irrelevant. I feel like the Wizard of Oz who could bestow courage, or heart, or brains simply by helping the lion, the tin man and the scarecrow see themselves more clearly. Well, today, see yourself as creative to the very core. Own that special quality. Take it with you wherever you go. And use it relentlessly. Let it be your hammer in a world of nails.

Congratulations graduates. You deserve every moment of happiness today with your families.