

*Affirming a Commitment to the General Education of Art Students*

AACU Conference

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Thank you for coming. Today's discussion, entitled "Affirming a Commitment to the General Education of Art Students," shares information and challenges we face, as leaders of Liberal Arts and general education at arts colleges. We also suggest some possible solutions regarding the kinds of education that young artists receive at these institutions, and that they need, to enhance their success as artists and as people.<sup>1</sup>

More and more of today's aspiring artists begin their creative journeys through study in arts colleges—conservatories, design schools and colleges that focus exclusively on the fine and performing arts—colleges like Berklee College of Music, Columbia College Chicago, the College of Visual Arts, Julliard, Eastman, Cornish College of the Arts, the Peabody Conservatory, the Rhode Island School of Design, the New England Conservatory and others. We represent three of these colleges—Peabody, Cornish College and Berklee. We are each going to share some ideas, regarding our schools, and then open up the floor for questions and conversation.

Introductions—Let's introduce ourselves.

Partnering Study in the Arts and Liberal Arts Study

At most arts colleges, there is a tenuous and contested relationship between the education that students receive in their art disciplines and all the other subjects: course work or space that exists beyond the discipline-specific major. Most often, these other

classes are identified as Liberal Arts or general education and are often, unfortunately, given a kind of second-class status. Depending on the institution's history, the Liberal Arts component is likely to have evolved as an afterthought, often in response to regional accreditation requirements.

Certainly, at Berklee College of Music, where I chair the Liberal Arts Department, this is the case. The largest music college in the world, Berklee has a student body of 4,000 undergraduate students on its Boston campus. Founded in 1945 as a professional school to prepare students to enter careers as contemporary musicians, Berklee became a college, and added education in the Liberal Arts, much later in its development. And that education was added mostly to satisfy accreditation demands. While there were, for many years, general education requirements, there was not, really, a general education or Liberal Arts program, no sense of how study in Liberal Arts would benefit the aspiring artist. Until recently, there was no sense of a partnership between study in Liberal Arts and study in music. And a partnership between arts study and broader liberal arts study is what would benefit aspiring artists the most.<sup>2</sup>

While much has been written about the need for a broad worldview for those preparing for careers in business, law or medicine, there has been little discussion about the benefits of a broad education to the artist him or herself.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps most who function outside of the arts and beyond arts colleges assume that a study of music at a conservatory or of painting at a museum school includes this broad view. But that assumption is incorrect. In fact, that was my assumption. This is just my third year, leading Liberal Arts at Berklee. My Ph.D. is in English Language and Literature and I have been teaching at the college level for more than 20 years. For the ten years before I came to Berklee, I led and designed Liberal Arts programs for students majoring in

business, technology and health. While there was tension between those majors and general education, I have actually seen more of this at Berklee, a tension that I had not expected.

Indeed, the education offered at an arts college can sometimes narrow, rather than broaden, the aspiring artist. There are, among the faculty at arts colleges, those who say that students arrive at school excited and creative their first year, only to have the creativity knocked out of them as they learn the foundations of their craft, as they learn that each art discipline is full of rules, traditions, and histories that need to be mastered, and on which they are tested.

As each art is broken down into its elements—and these elements are presented in separate classes—it can come to seem, somehow, that harmony is distinct from arranging, and that “matching pitch” and training one’s ear are rote exercises, somehow unrelated to the actual making of music. Yet, creativity and sustainability come from synthesis, from joining distinct elements in ways that are new and meaningful.

As Liberal Arts Department chair, I have seen the tension that exists between training in the arts disciplines and other kinds of education, and I have seen the kind of narrowing that can occur as students learn to take their art apart and to analyze its many pieces.

I have also seen the very positive value of broad study, study beyond the boundaries of the arts discipline, to the developing artist. When artists allow themselves to think outside of their art—to exceed the boundaries of their own specialization—they grow as people and become better artists.

I have additionally seen how little this kind of growth is understood by the institution itself. At Berklee, brilliant and well-meaning music faculty lament the

shortness of students' four years of study and long for students to be able to have "more music." Yet, students struggle desperately to balance their development as musicians, as individuals and as people. In many ways, they need not "more" music, but "less." In fact, the intense specialization that exists in arts education can actually prohibit the development of what most young artists need—space for reflection, for understanding the world in which they live and for examining their place in that world.

I have also found that study of Liberal Arts is most effective for artists when it is partnered with the art in a significant way—such as studying art in context and exploring the social and cultural environment in which art is created, as well as the impact that art has on society, or examining the mathematical or scientific aspects of art, such as in the physics of sound, for example. Such a partnership of fine, performing and Liberal Arts emphasizes the connections among disciplines of study, and reminds us that, while colleges are divided into academic departments that approach questions from a discipline-specific vantage point, life is not so neatly divided.

Recently, we have had success at Berklee with developing this partnership. Some of this results, again, from pressure from our regional accreditor, the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. For years, since creating a general education program, Berklee required that students take 25% of their credits in general education. There were Liberal Arts requirements, and very talented Liberal Arts faculty, but the college lacked a comprehensive program—a reason why these requirements were in place and a rationale for the learning that would result from successful completion of the requirements.

The accreditors asked for revisions in several areas:

- 1) There was no residency requirement for general education study and many

students, though fewer than what the Liberal Arts faculty feared, took these classes at local community colleges and transferred them in; in fact, the scholarship office would often recommend this to students who were having financial trouble. The accreditors challenged this, arguing that there was no way to control the quality or to define the learning that was part of general education if students could take classes anywhere.

This challenge led to a college policy change, beginning in fall 2009, that students, once matriculated, must take their Liberal Arts classes, like all their classes, at Berklee.

- 2) Accreditors also challenged Berklee to define its general education program not only in terms of requirements but in terms of learning; this prompted several important changes—the development of a mission statement and clear learning outcomes for general education, as well as a name change of the general education program to the Liberal Arts program, a change, symbolic but also significant, that indicates that Berklee offers its students a music education and a Liberal Arts education—an education that widens while also giving students the tools to develop their artistry.

The mission statement of the college itself was re-written so that it states that Berklee “enables our students to employ their musical education in a global society by providing a coherent liberal arts curriculum that informs their thinking about issues that have shaped our time.”

The Liberal Art Department wrote a mission statement and defined learning outcomes for the first time in the college’s history. This was a challenging process, one that involved all the department’s 50+ faculty. The

statement emphasizes that we “foster students’ creativity and artistry by educating the whole person.” It further states that the Liberal Arts program “focuses on the interdisciplinary learning that artists and musicians need to succeed in today’s world.”

- 3) Third and most difficult for Berklee, accreditors required that Berklee – and all colleges that are accredited through NEASC – increase its percentage of general education from 25% to 30%. This requirement prompted a college wide Curriculum Review Initiative, now in its 5<sup>th</sup> year, that has been extremely painful. While the above changes were embraced by the college community for the most part, this last change has been resisted and often misunderstood by those faculty outside of Liberal Arts.

One solution, fitting with the direction that the Liberal Arts Department has emphasized, involves creating a Music & Society track of courses. These are interdisciplinary courses that help students write, think and understand music in context. Such courses include Music, Gender and Society; the Sociology of Black Music; and Indian Art, Music and Culture. Some of the new credits in the Liberal Arts program, then, are courses that mix music and other liberal arts disciplines, but that do not focus on performance. These are taught by members of the Liberal Arts Department as well as by other faculty, as appropriate, from around the college.

Even with this solution that most everyone supports, there remains tension about the new requirements. For in order to add something new, something else needs to be cut. This is a work in progress.

Additionally, in an effort to expand the partnership between Liberal Arts and

music study at Berklee, we have expanded our artist and scholars series, inviting artists to campus who help emphasize the importance to their art of the learning they have done in other disciplines. For instance, Dr. Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock and curator emeritus at the Smithsonian Institute, spent a week on campus, meeting with faculty and students, talking about her artistic development, leading a master class of singers, and explaining how her study of and knowledge in American history and particularly African-American history shaped her understanding of American music and made her a better musician.

Preparing for life as an artist is a huge commitment. Any artist will tell you that this undertaking cannot be approached lightly. It requires a dedication to a certain direction, and a passion. And it is often difficult. While some aspiring artists have the support of their family and friends as they embark on their journey, many do not. I cannot tell you the number of students who enroll in Berklee College of Music—after a very extensive and competitive application, audition and interview process—against the advice of their families. Their parents may have urged students to put the guitar down and, instead, choose a “more practical” career.

The understandings gained through study in Liberal Arts are important to aspiring artists, as they are to all of us. For society as a whole needs artists to remain the eyes, ears and interpreters of the very complex world in which we live. Artists more and more feel the pressure of the commercial world: a pressure to create visual imagery that can meet the high graphic needs of this computer age, to create music that can be used primarily in video games, or to write scripts mainly for television sit-coms—all of which is important, valuable and creative work, please do not misunderstand me. For every artist today wants and should attain commercial success. Yet, the pressure of the

commercial needs a way to be balanced with the creative, so that the artist him or herself is not lost, so that the artist is aware of the choices he or she is making and can feel that those choices are good, ethical and sound ones that fit into a creative context.

Helping developing artists shape and control their art, their direction and their lives, helping them prepare for life, is something that the arts college is all about and something that is best done when study of the art discipline and broad study in Liberal Arts work together. This partnership helps artists create and learn.

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<sup>1</sup> Helpful in reflecting upon the ways that colleges teach art are the following:  
Elkins, James. *Why Art Cannot Be Taught: A Handbook for Art Students*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.  
Singerman, Howard. *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*. Berkeley: University of California, 1999.  
Stevelt-Kaser, Kelly, Sara Pennington-Busick, and Mindi Rhoades. *Redefining the Principles and Elements of Educating Artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Ohio State University. December 2004. Web. 10 March 2009.

<sup>2</sup> For more about the intersection of liberal education and artists' education, see the minutes from the conferences of the Consortium for the Liberal Education of Artists, <http://www.cleararts.org/HOME.html>. Also see the proceedings from the National Conferences on Liberal Arts and the Education of Artists, sponsored by the School of Visual Arts, [http://www.schoolofvisualarts.edu/ug/index.jsp?sid0=1&sid1=46&page\\_id=497#proceedings](http://www.schoolofvisualarts.edu/ug/index.jsp?sid0=1&sid1=46&page_id=497#proceedings).

<sup>3</sup> The excellent work of the American Association of Colleges and Universities provides general and comprehensive resources about the value of a liberal education to students in professional education programs, including law, medicine and business. See The American Association of Colleges and Universities. 2009. Web. 28 August 2009.

Also see The Business, Entrepreneurship and Liberal Learning (BELL) Project, sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Teagle Foundation. This is a 3-year project, begun in 2009, "to determine how educators can help ensure that undergraduate students who major in business and other professional fields also gain the benefits of a strong liberal arts education." For more information, see "Business, Entrepreneurship and Liberal Learning (BELL)." The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. 2009. Web. 24 August 24, 2009.

Additional helpful sources include:  
Berkowitz, Peter. "Liberal Education, Then and Now." *Policy Review* 140 (Dec 2006-Jan 2007): 1-9. Web. 14 July 2009.  
Chew, Byron E, and Cecilia McInnis-Bowers. "Blending Liberal Art & Business Education." *Liberal Education* 90.1 (Winter 2004): 56-63. Print.  
Jones, Roberts T. "Liberal Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Business Expectations." *Liberal Education* 91.2 (Spring 2005): 32-37. Print.  
Hermann, Mary. "Linking Liberal and Professional Learning in Nursing Education." *Liberal Education* 90.4 (Fall 2004): 42-47. Print.

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Paris, David C. *Business and the Liberal Arts: Integrating Professional and Liberal Education: Report of a Symposium on the Liberal Arts and Business, May 2007*. Washington, DC: Council of Independent Colleges, 2007.

Shulman, Lee. "Pedagogies of Uncertainty." *Liberal Education* 91.2 (Spring 2005): 18-25. Print.