

“And Creativity Is *What?*”

By **Barbara Couture**, senior vice chancellor for academic affairs, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln

The question posed in my title—“And creativity is *what?*”—could reflect the wistful musing of a philosopher conducting a Socratic dialogue with attentive followers on a lofty hill overlooking the Aegean. Or it could be the puzzled query of a chief academic officer from University of Nebraska—reminded today by one of her colleagues that there are still some in the east who are not certain whether Nebraska is a state or a football team, let alone the home of a great research university teeming with, well, creativity.

Just what is creativity in the heartland, in Lincoln, Nebraska, where the university has been home to the Huskers, Willa Cather, Johnny Carson, Ted Kooser, and Warren Buffett? I ask this question because we know that public education—including the work of great universities—is a local enterprise in America, with its outcomes dependent on taxpayers in the cities and states that support it.

Many of us at universities are fortunate to have endowed programs that spur creative energy. The University of Nebraska–Lincoln, for instance, is blessed with several. Among them is the J. D. Edwards Program in computer science and business—recently touted by Bill Gates as the most innovative program of its kind that he has seen—which brings together top students in a project environment to solve business problems. And we have our U-Care program, which provides scholarships for hundreds of students, enabling them to conduct research with faculty members and gain first-hand experience of creating new knowledge, scholarship, and art. But special programs like these and the others described in this issue beg the

question: can we support creativity with public funding? We can, I say, if we can tell the public what they’re paying for and why.

Accrediting agencies and boards of regents remind us all the time that colleges and universities must be accountable for student performance. But we are learning, too, that they and American businesses and industry hold us accountable for developing, quite literally, creativity—for producing an American workforce that can outdo any other in innovation, entrepreneurship, and technical and scientific discovery. It is our problem to tell our public what creative performance is and what we can do to develop it. We have in this issue of *Peer Review* an action plan for the creative imperative. Let’s apply it.

Tori Haring Smith informs us that creative people are “remarkably like those students we all love to teach: intelligent, open-minded risk-takers who have self-confidence, enjoy tackling challenges, value domestic and global diversity, and engage in synthetic, flexible, and creative problem solving.” Stephen Tepper identifies creativity in action, citing Csikszentmihalyi’s finding that creativity is about “flow”—the sensation that individuals feel when they are fully engaged with a task in which they experience a sense of exhilaration and deep enjoyment while working through a challenge or puzzle with poise, skill, and some level of mastery.” Michael Devine tells us to “lose the hats,” in other words, get rid of the hierarchical structures that create less open—and less creative—environments for faculty and students alike. We now *know* what creative performance is, so let’s teach it in our basic programs.

We have at hand the tools in our great colleges and universities to make this happen, if we are bold enough to use them. We can

- develop partnerships with community agencies and corporations that link learning within classrooms to problem solving in settings beyond them;
- demand integrative learning experiences within our general education programs;
- link the service projects led by student organizations to projects requiring learning in our classrooms;
- use our libraries, museums, performance spaces, and recreational facilities as places for developing active creative work;
- make assessment of learning outcomes a mandate and require creative performance of every graduate.

A lot of work is implied in the five statements above, but it can be done, and within our current budgets. My own university has multiple ongoing projects, programs, and initiatives that are aimed at achieving these objectives, and I would guess that most universities in America have their sights set on them as well. And they better. Let me leave you with one more reason why.

The world today is a scary place. We have the immediate threat of terrorism on the one hand—one which compels us to find new ways to protect our population here and abroad—and the persistent and more damning threats of global poverty and imperial oppression on the other. In *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, Cornel West reminds

us of America's complicity in contributing to these problems. But he does identify a solution—developing the creative power of the democratic individual. West's democracy “is more a verb than a noun—it is more a dynamic striving and collective movement than a static order or stationary status quo” (2004, 68). It is, I would argue, the hallmark of a society of creative individuals who *do*.

The day-to-day press of activity in today's universities, responding to the limits of state budgets, the demands of accrediting agencies, and the expectations of parents, employers, and governing boards, leaves little time for administrators to talk freely about the ultimate role of public higher education in America. Yet such constraints should never keep us from fulfilling it. And creativity is *what*? It is both our American legacy and future; it is our obligation to *do* democracy. ■

Reference

West, C. 2004. *Democracy matters: Winning the fight against imperialism*. New York: Penguin.

Results of the Peer Review Readership Survey

In January 2005, *Peer Review* readers were invited by e-mail to participate in a self-response, Web-based readership survey. Through a brief, anonymous survey, information was collected about readers and their satisfaction with the journal's contents. Here are some of the highlights of these the *Peer Review* readership study findings:

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