

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Creative Inquiry: A Case Study of the Marriage of Arts & Creativity in an American University's General Education Program

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: In this paper, I examine the ways in which today's ideal of liberal education in the US is shifting under the weight of an increasingly vocational agenda. The value of a college degree is tied not only to the transactional value of the "ticket" but also the recipient's embodied and objective forms of distinction. A "well-rounded" General Education curriculum is intended to go beyond instrumental goals of vocational training in specific majors; however, pressures to meet market demands have eroded arguments of knowledge for knowledge's sake. Yet, despite or perhaps because of economic pressure, soft skills such as "critical thinking" and "creativity" are still lauded. At the University of Kentucky, these internal and external pressures influenced a substantive reform of the university's general education curriculum, explicitly including a requirement for a course in "Foundations of Inquiry in Arts and Creativity". This case study research explores the creation and implementation of that reform.

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Background:

The history of general education in the United States is a story of educational ideals intertwined with market demands. Regardless of historical context, graduates trade their credentials for some form of social or economic status. What is not clear is the extent to which that trade is based on technical skills or cultural capacity to translate skills into status. Debates about general education have always included questions of cultural capital demanded by the consumers of college credentials: what kinds of worldly culture do students need to know relative to what kinds of technical knowledge that will make them marketable? These debates also reflect social justice questions of whose kind of worldly knowledge is important and who gets access to which markets? Alain Touraine argued that general education serves as a consolidation of the social hierarchy, saying "...Some familiarity with traditional culture would shortly become a requisite for achieving certain levels of advancement within the society of the highly credentialed populace" (In Guillory, 2006). So while the history of the college curriculum is one of tensions between vocational goals and goals of knowledge for knowledge's sake, there has always been a recognition by the public consumer and the educational designers that signaling power of credentials must include both skill and social distinction. General education is one way for students to acquire cultural capital and exemplars of "legitimate" high culture that will allow them to leverage their degree and claim to be "well educated".

There has been a marked decline, however, in the extent to which a liberal education introduces a student to the arts or to the creative spaces of aesthetic literacy. In particular, American scholars have lamented the separation of fine arts from the liberal arts and the neglect of the fine arts in liberal education. Conrad and Pratt (1981) argued that fine arts provide a bridge between knowledge as consumed and knowledge as produced as a spiritual human activity that goes beyond any one disciplinary project. They propose that liberal education is embodied in large part in the arts as a fundamental human process of learning. Creativity is therefore, in their argument, missing from a liberal education which sidelines the fine arts. Art history, while deeply related, is not enough if still separated from the "doing" of art.

The Study:

American general education is arguably one of the few places in higher education writ large where this kind of university wide curriculum may be found. This paper reflects an exploration of one such program at the University of Kentucky. The University of Kentucky is one of the few institutions in the United States with a non-humanities based arts/creativity requirement in its general education curriculum. In 2012, the university underwent a significant reform to its undergraduate curriculum, building on its status as a research university to focus its general education program on four areas of intellectual inquiry": humanities, physical sciences, social sciences, and an unusual requirement for a course in the foundations of inquiry in arts and creativity.

The purpose of this curricular case study was to explore the development of this requirement and document its implementation as an exemplar of this unique area of undergraduate education. The objectives of this project were to a) tell the story of how this curricular requirement came about, b) describe the ways in which it has been implemented, and c) contextualize this story relative to larger reforms in general education and understandings of creativity as a value in society.

In order to accurately portray the history of the curricular reform and its implementation, I interviewed faculty involved in the curricular reform process, university administrators involved in the funding of the new curriculum, and instructors responsible for designing and teaching new arts and

creativity classes. In addition, I reviewed documentation of the reform process including new course applications for the new Arts and Creativity courses from the time of implementation until Spring 2019. Finally, I also analyzed artifacts produced by these courses that were collected as part of the university's curricular assessment process.

I am currently analyzing these data paying particular attention to the ways in which the curriculum was and is understood by the various institutional stakeholders. For example, the dean of the college of business at the time of the reform was an active supporter of the inclusion of "creativity" citing Richard Florida's "Creative Class". A panel of faculty from the humanities celebrated the possibility of including "the arts" in the new general education program for very different reasons. The requirement was approved by the University Senate with less than sixty minutes of discussion! Yet, the logistics of designing a course that requires students to actively produce creative works (despite perhaps having no arts background) are daunting and implementation has been uneven. There are interesting lessons to be drawn, however, regarding the ways in which aesthetic inquiry can, as Conrad and Pratt argued thirty years ago, "...prefigure the ordered balance of tomorrow in measured reflections of today" (1981, p. 57).

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