

To: Stella Deen, Interim Graduate Dean/Associate Provost and Professor of English and members of the Liberal Education Committee

cc: Paul Kassel, Interim Dean, School of Fine and Performing Arts

From: Art Department Faculty

Date: March 12, 2014

Re: The Art Department's response to the proposed Liberal Education Plan

The Art Department respectfully submits its objection to the structure of the proposed Liberal Education plan as it stands, seeing in it a bias towards modes of learning that favor quantitative inquiry over other equally important ways of thinking about knowledge formation and ways of knowing the world.

The Liberal Education Committee may be interested to know that Stanford University recently re-imagined their General Education curriculum by shifting entirely away from discipline-based to capacity-based ways of achieving breadth of knowledge. Stanford “recognizes the diversity of approaches to learning within any discipline and asks its faculty to consider what approaches they are taking in a given class and the overall approaches emphasized within a major.” (<https://undergrad.stanford.edu/programs/ways/about> and <https://undergrad.stanford.edu/programs/ways/ways>).

They have identified EIGHT WAYS OF THINKING/WAYS OF DOING:

- Aesthetic and Interpretive Inquiry (2 courses)
- Applied Quantitative Reasoning (1 course)
- Creative Expression (1 course)
- Engaging Diversity (1 course)
- Ethical Reasoning (1 course)
- Formal Reasoning (1 course)
- Scientific Method and Analysis (2 courses)
- Social Inquiry (2 courses)

Art Department faculty agree with Stanford faculty that this structure provides students with a more clearly articulated and meaningful rationale for breadth and more flexibility in selecting courses of interest in a wide array of fields. We note that Creative Expression and Aesthetic and Interpretive Inquiry are central to their plan and equally valued with other ways of thinking and doing.

Stanford's rationale for the importance of Creative Expressions reads: “The ability to design, to create, and to perform – each enriches our lives in substantial and meaningful ways. Thinking creatively, giving expressive shape to ideas, and communicating those ideas imaginatively, are not only indispensable to all artistic endeavors, they also represent broadly applicable skills that strengthen and enhance traditional academic pursuits, stimulate

effective problem-solving, and foster originality and innovation in new areas.” Stanford’s rationale for Aesthetic and Interpretive Inquiry reads: “Every reflective person needs to confront the variety of cultural and artistic efforts to express and understand the human condition. These efforts include theoretical traditions, such as philosophy, and aesthetic or expressive traditions, such as literature, music, and the visual arts. Students should develop the analytic techniques and interpretive skills to appreciate and understand both creative and theoretical achievements of human cultures, and thus to nurture a deeper conception of their own place in the universe.”

The Art Department strongly believes that our own Liberal Education structure needs to support coursework that relies on experiential learning, that involves critical thinking, material exploration, open-ended questioning, aesthetic and cultural practice, qualitative forms of data gathering, and emergent forms of inquiry. We believe the fine arts and design offer unique experiences not found in any other discipline. Specifically, the study of studio art practice is a process that reaches beyond the borders of art making. It includes creation, production, innovation, presentation, distribution and communication, each having the same weight of importance. As students apply their creativity and intellect to solve problems, they learn there is no singular *right answer*, but a myriad of possibilities. The practice of making art develops an agile and nimble mind, one open to imagining divergent and convergent scenarios. This is a prerequisite skill necessary to spark innovation and navigate the complexities of the 21st century.

It is written and acknowledged widely that today’s high school and university educators see far less divergent thinking and creative problem solving than in the past. (With the instigation of the New York State Common Core tests adopted last year, it has been noted that only one "right" method of deriving answers is acknowledged. So a student could arrive at the correct answer using an alternative method and get the whole thing wrong. As K-12 gets more compressed into packaged curriculum and students are rewarded for conformity, the only other opportunity to encourage self-motivated creative and intellectual risk-taking is college.) Schools across the country are trying to address this problem. See the article: *Gaining STEAM: Teaching Science Through Art* (some schools are adding art to the STEM equation, with good results) <http://www.usnews.com/news/stem-solutions/articles/2014/02/13/gaining-steam-teaching-science-though-art> and *Learning to Think Outside the Box* (Creativity Becomes an Academic Discipline) http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/09/education/edlife/creativity-becomes-an-academic-discipline.html?emc=eta1&_r=0

We wish to call the Committee’s attention to the SUNY Potsdam team led by Provost Dr. Margaret Madden that is embracing an art-integrated STEM curriculum. This initiative is being funded by a grant from Lockheed Martin Corporation, and is tied to a \$27 million fundraising campaign. Thus the initiative to widen the framework of STEM to STEAM is already happening within the SUNY System. <http://www.potsdam.edu/newsandevents/53013stemeducation.cfm>

The Liberal Education committee’s website frames liberal education as a philosophic approach to education that, among other things, prepares individuals to live responsible, productive, creative lives in a dramatically changing world, fosters intellectual resilience, and “develops core skills of perception, analysis, and expression.”

There are several ways we learn about, understand, and take action in the world. The sciences utilize empirical methods allowing us to investigate the world as it exists; language is a systematic method for communicating ideas about the world with others; and art is a method of inquiry enabling us to imagine, investigate, and construct possible worlds. In other words, the arts, like science and language, are not simply content areas: they are *fundamental ways of knowing* impacting both physical and ideational aspects of existence. The arts require unique skill sets that enable individuals and groups to engage with ill-structured problems characterized by uncertainty, innovation, uniqueness, and value conflict (Schön, 1983). Failing to provide students with opportunities to experience and develop the skills to face ill-structured problems is tantamount to failing to prepare our students to meet the needs facing contemporary society. It disallows us to meet the objectives set forth in the Liberal Education Committee's stated goals. Additionally, by neglecting this critical component, SUNY New Paltz presents a public face to the world that demonstrates a "blind spot" in a critical area related to innovation in real-world contexts.

To realize the Liberal Education Committee's goals and address this blind spot, the proposal should include a required Arts course in addition to NSCI and Composition/Foreign Language, allowing students to experience three fundamental ways of knowing (science, language, and art).

In the proposal's current form, "enhanced" courses are designed to allow General Education requirements to be taken within the major which 1) is disruptive to the plan's emphasis on interdisciplinary learning, and 2) positions an unreasonable amount of roadblocks to students taking art classes. For example, according to the STEM description, classes in Science and Engineering will be automatically designated "STEM-enhanced" even though according to this same description many art courses could meet the STEM enhanced designation yet would not receive automatic designation. This places an unfair workload burden on art faculty to submit paperwork to have courses designated STEM enhanced so that art students can also take GEs within their major. How can a biology class be STEM enhanced when it is inherently STEM curriculum? It is like saying a painting class is "art enhanced."

And finally, we wish to point to the college's Eight Vision Points, which state that the focus of SUNY New Paltz is to "meet regional economic and schooling needs and be a cultural and intellectual hub for the Mid Hudson Region." In this statement the President notes the national scope of our highly renowned MFA Program, and the significant economic impact that the arts have upon the region. Recognizing the long tradition of excellence in the arts, the vision plan states "Our Fine and Performing Arts events [...] should be magnets that draw friends and fans to the college. We will proudly proclaim our cultural and economic impact, and aim to be celebrated as a regional resource and gem."

We agree with President Christian's statement and believe that a firm grounding in the fine arts is an *intrinsic* part of what makes New Paltz a unique and exceptional institution. The School of Fine and Performing Arts at New Paltz enjoys the reputation of being one of the strongest Schools at the College, and one of the strongest in the State University system. It is

Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. London, UK: Temple-Smith.

possible to argue that culture is more richly embedded in the arts than in the other schools of knowledge. It is certainly true that once an individual is awakened to the richness of culture in the arts, this culture is easily accessible to them. Artists create, artists share, artists help people access information and make space for solutions.

We leave you with this thought:

Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity or it becomes the practice of freedom, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.

Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed