

The State of the Visual Arts at Two-Year Colleges

Kay A. Klotzbach, Camden County College

Abstract

Art has never been more visible. Design is everywhere and we are living in a time where images are becoming as common in our day-to-day lives as the written word. How important is art to academia? By examining the relationship between art and business, the place of studio art in a liberal arts education and asking specific questions to art faculty at two-year colleges about their experiences within the institution, including the MFA-Doctorate debate we can perhaps reveal the state of the visual arts at two-year colleges. A survey that polled art faculty in New Jersey, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia and Pennsylvania provides the data for the paper.

Art has never been more visible. Design is everywhere and we are living in a time where images are becoming as common in our day-to-day lives as the written word. How important is art to academia? Casual conversations with art colleagues at two-year colleges were inconclusive. By examining the relationship between art and business, the place of studio art in a liberal arts education and asking specific questions to art faculty at two-year colleges about their art programs and their experiences within the institution we can perhaps reveal the state of the visual arts at two-year colleges. All data is derived from a survey designed by the author and the Princeton Survey Research Center. The survey was sent to a sampling of art faculty at two-year colleges in New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia and is referred to in this paper as The State of the Visual Arts at Two-Year Colleges - Princeton Survey.

The Art and Business Connection

Art and business are now joined at the hip. “Hip” best describes the business model for

today. Words like creative, innovative, visionary and cutting-edge not only apply to art but describe successful businesses as well. Companies like Apple, Design within Reach, Ikea, Google, Starbucks, Bang and Olufsen and even Target have hooked their wagons to innovative thinking, marketing and design. The business world has co-opted art from the museum and created an audience that will pay for it. In the Harvard Business Review, *The MFA is the New MBA*, author, Pink (2004) announced, “an arts degree is now perhaps the hottest credential in the world of business. Corporate recruiters have begun visiting the top arts grad schools – places such as the Rhode Island School of Design, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Michigan’s Cranbrook Academy of Art – in search of talent” (p. 21). The reasons for this are multifarious and include too many MBA graduates, the availability of cheaper MBA’s in India and the understanding by business leaders that there must be a perceived difference between what they offer and what their competitors offer. According to Pink, successful companies strive “... to make their offerings transcendent – physically beautiful and emotionally compelling” in order to make their products different from their competitors (p. 21). Pink (2005) in *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* believes the creative classes are going to be the ones that are employed in the future. We are leaving the information age and moving into the conceptual age and those “knowledge-workers” of the past will no longer be needed as they have been outsourced. He places design at the forefront of skills one should have. “Everyone, regardless of profession, must cultivate an artistic sensibility... today we must all be designers” (p. 69).

Arts Role in a Liberal Arts Education

Although the business world desires those with “an artistic sensibility”, academia seems to view the visual arts as not so important. In the State of New Jersey it appears that arts education

is only for a select few. This is due to the new NJ Transfer Agreement. This agreement is a response to the Lampitt Bill, No. 336, introduced June 26, 2006. This bill was introduced because of students, their parents and administrator's of two-year college's complaints about the failure of many four-year NJ state colleges to accept credits completed at their two-year institutions. The purpose of the NJ Transfer Agreement: "seamless transition from associate to baccalaureate degree programs and supporting the successful acquisitions of baccalaureate degrees by transfer students" (New Jersey President's Council). The formation of this agreement has brought about an examination of what constitutes a liberal arts degree and what courses should be designated as general education courses. A probability but not a certainty at the publication of this paper is that studio art courses will no longer be accepted as general education electives without extensive modification of the syllabi and student learning outcomes.

NJ two-year art faculties report that fifty percent or more of their students in their studio classes are not art majors. Removing studio courses from general education lists could have devastating programming and budgeting consequences for the art departments at these colleges and perhaps the students themselves? This is clearly not good for the community college student either. In many cases students do not know what they want to pursue and providing an art class can change their perception of not only art but their other studies as well. Students that have been marginalized by the educational system in the past find a haven in the arts that allows them to engage in learning and encourages them to continue their studies. Perhaps the logic of the leadership is that transferring students can take studio art courses as electives when they transfer to four-year state colleges. However, if one looks at course catalogues at four-year colleges most studio courses are prescribed for art majors. In most cases studio courses would not be a welcoming place for those without a "serious interest" and some experience with art making.

Yes, art history and art appreciation would be open to the non-art major student and are still considered general education courses but there are distinct differences between talking about art and making it. The kind of learning that takes place in a studio class versus a class that discusses art are not the same. How does one go about creating business leaders and a work force that can think creatively if they no longer take studio art courses?

Pick up any document that defends the visual arts and it stresses that art increases creativity and problem solving skills, but does it? A report *Studio Thinking: How Visual Arts Teaching Can Promote Disciplined Habits of Mind* by Winner, Hetland, Veenema, Sheridan and Palmer (2006) dismisses this theory as antidotal. The report found that studying the arts does not enhance critical and creative thinking outside of the art classroom (p. 3 and 6). Winner proposes that more research needs to be done and that other creative outcomes should be explored like, the ability to discover new questions or problems (p. 7). The lack of research data to support the importance of the arts is perhaps one reason that it continues to be dismissed as “secondary” to other disciplines. However, the report did list specific “habits of mind” that studio experiences give students. Studio experiences include: demonstration, lecture, working with the students individually and through group critique sessions. Studio habits of mind would include learning about craft, art history and providing opportunities for students to explore connections between those artists that came before them with their own art practice. Students also learn to focus and observe for a sustained amount of time, how to deal with frustration and persevere and envision what cannot be seen. Students learn how to express their personal vision and reflect about their art making at intervals and on completion. This reflection can include questions, explaining, and evaluating that can lead to further exploration by the student. The upside of art making for the student is that they are pushed beyond what they did before and encouraged to take risks. The

authors do admit that these eight habits appear in other disciplines as well (science for instance) and that a hypothesis of transfer of these habits to other subjects might be plausible but further research would need to be done (para.10- 17). “The arts must stand on what they teach directly” (Hetland, p. 3). The problem might be that this is not enough for academia. The lack of scholarly research in what art education brings to the non-art major at the college level must be explored. Most research is done with early learners not with college age students. If art is to have a valued place in higher education art educators must do what professors in other disciplines do: conduct research, capture data, publish and add to the scholarly discourse concerning the importance of their discipline

Why would those making decisions not consider studio art as a general education course? Could it be their educational background does not include a performance art aspect or is it that art is just not academic enough? Elkins (2004) presents this second premise and thinks that the training artists receive does not look serious enough. In the past the courses artists take in art school are not the subjects that doctors, lawyers and business majors take. Subjects like physics, anthropology, biology and chemistry (p. 62). Elkins (2004) writes that art is academic “in the sense that it depends on the idea that art is a systematic, intellectual pursuit” (pp. 44-45). Others in the field of art, such as Dorn (2006) believe that art educators need to stop trying to convince others that art is a scholarly field. Art is an intelligent activity but it does not need to be an intellectual one (p. 119). The educational system both at the secondary and college level continue to put greater importance on mathematics, science, and other “hardcore” disciplines, which are seen as more “useful”. Gardner (2006) writes in *Five Minds for the Future* that people need to be able to think in specific ways. He defines essential disciplines that students should take before college as science, math, history and one art form. This could include learning to play an

instrument, play writing or drawing from the figure (p. 31). Unfortunately the majority of students in high schools in many states are not taking these art disciplines and now they won't be taken at the community college level either. For instance the State of NJ high school student needs only ten credits in any visual and performing art or in something called practical arts to graduate. Practical arts are listed as career education and consumer, family and life skills (*Academic & Professional Standards*, 2006). These so-called "practical arts" do not teach visual art. This makes it possible that students can graduate from high school without taking a single studio art course.

In the book, *The Open Eye in Learning, The Role of Art in General Education*, Bassett (1969) writes that the goal of a democratic society is to produce a populace that contributes individually to the community (p. 1). These contributions can come from the student's experience with the arts. Bassett (1969) seems to think that the rejection of the arts is historical, "the founding fathers were by background and by necessity hard-thinking men who, if they considered the graces of life at all, thought of them as a product of the dim future when man's physical needs had been met" (p. 3). Dismissal of art unfortunately, could also come from the dismissal of artists. *Artists for a Better Image*, "a non-profit advocacy organization whose purpose is to promote the process of being an artist" ("Artists for a Better Image") lists words to suggest the stereotyping of artists: con artist, malcontent, amateur, dabbler and radical. Elkins (2001) says that the public sees artists as nuts, most definitely liberal and probably unstable. Others view artists as moody, manic and depressive and then there is the "starving artist" stereotype. The image of artists as failing and unemployable does not jive with the facts. McCulloch-Lovell (2006) writes that in New England in 1997, the "creative cluster" contributed more than 245,000 jobs. The "creative cluster" is defined as the work force that includes artists,

educators, craftspeople, stores that sell art materials, galleries, designers of all sorts and those that work for cultural non-profit organizations. \$6.6 billion was generated from outside the region in just cultural tourism alone (p.1). “New Jersey’s non-profit arts industry generates over \$1.5 billion each year in economic activity for the State of New Jersey through direct spending by arts groups and related patron spending, including over \$36 million in state tax revenues. According to a 2007 study conducted by Americans for the Arts, arts activities in Newark and New Brunswick together generate over \$214 million in economic activity with nearly 5,500 jobs, and over \$8 million in local government tax revenue”(Talking Points). If artists are so distasteful it seems odd that many local governments are advertising for artists in publications *like Art Calendar* so that they can revitalize towns, like Millville, New Jersey and Oil City, Pennsylvania. Mayor, James F. Quinn, Mayor of Millville said, “The arts-based economy revitalization has brought a virtual renaissance in Millville’s historic downtown. Since the inception of the downtown art district, Millville, NJ has seen the arrival of 83 new businesses and over \$22 million invested in real estate, new construction rehabilitation and new public spaces. The business vacancy rate has dropped 50% to 8% in the last six years and 95 new jobs were created in 2006 alone” (Arts Smart Investment: Economic Prosperity Through the Art).

The bottom line is that “art is frankly a public ‘good,’ but it cannot be verified statistically in an individual way. We also cannot prove empirically that aesthetic values fuel the life of the mind, which is perhaps our most important goal” (Dorn, p. 118). However, we can prove that art is very good for business and generates dollars. In a society where we place quite a bit of emphasis on the acquisition of money this would seem to be a powerful argument for the arts.

Value of the Art Department

Another way to garner the importance of a discipline is to see how the people that labor within it are treated. Are the art faculty respected, are their contributions valued and are they treated fairly? The answer, one would suppose is based on whom you ask and where they teach. In all states surveyed, fifty-one percent of the faculty felt that the art department was treated as an important part of the institution. In the State of NJ only thirty percent of the art faculty felt this way. The Princeton Survey revealed a myriad of concerns and issues. Faculty overall were almost evenly divided between those that thought things were the same or better (enrollment, facilities, art budget, quality of their students) than they were five years ago and those that felt things are worse or much worse than they were five years ago. However, when focusing exclusively on art faculty in the State of NJ, fifty-six percent of the faculty reported that things were worse or “really bad”. What is causing this discontent? Seventy-two percent of the faculty had experienced diminishing art budgets at a time when activity and materials fees are increasing for students taking art courses. Fifty-six percent of the faculty have no idea how much of the money charged to student’s for material fees were actually returned to the art budget. Isolation from other community college art faculty, isolation from the rest of the college community and having dedicated studio space in which to teach were the most serious challenges reported in the survey. New Jersey faculty also experienced more discrimination than art faculty in other states due to their educational degree.

Master of Fine Arts Degree - Misunderstood

Seventeen percent of art professors in New Jersey said they had experienced problems with tenure and promotion due to their MFA degree while only ten percent of the arts faculty from other states reported problems. Some administrators and colleagues in other disciplines do not understand the MFA degree and this leaves studio faculty especially vulnerable. Grant (2007)

states that administrators at some colleges are pushing studio faculty to pursue doctorates because they are not comfortable having different criteria for various faculty members. Seventy-five percent of the art faculty experiencing problems with their MFA degree were given this reason along with the issue of fairness to other faculty members. This push by administrators for doctorates in the fine arts however is not a new issue. Research shows that the MFA has had its problems being universally accepted by academe since the fifties, although most problems with this degree are found at only a very small number of liberal art colleges and community colleges. One art faculty member wrote in the survey, “at our community college the MFA seems more undervalued than at a four- year university”. In 2004, The National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) published a Policy Analysis Paper, *Thinking About Terminal Professional Degrees in Art and Design* that not only addresses this issue but defines the degrees in the visual arts:

For many years, the field of art and design has offered and recognized two terminal degrees: the Master of Fine Arts and the Doctor of Philosophy. The Master of Fine Arts is awarded primarily in fields of studio practice and considered the professional terminal degree in those fields. The Doctor of Philosophy is awarded in fields of academic practice that focus on visual content. The Ph.D is the research terminal degree. (p. 1).

NASAD went on to discuss that because of so many questions concerning degrees by their own constituency they decided to examine the issue. Reasons raised included prestige factors, member’s complaints that they had to explain the MFA continuously and that they felt that a masters’ degree would never be accepted as equivalent to a doctorate (pp. 1-13). NASAD stated their position on the M.F.A:

For decades, institution and organizations have worked to gain acceptance of the MFA as a terminal degree. Today, the MFA, or its equivalent, has significant attention, support and respect in American higher education. The MFA is understood to be structured appropriately for the content that it addresses and the field it serves (p. 6).

This statement “the MFA, or its equivalent, has significant attention, support and respect in American higher education” seems false. If this were true it would not be necessary to write a “policy paper” in response to members concerns. The paper went on to say that a lot could be learned by studying other fields, mentioning music and law. Interestingly, both now have doctorate degrees in their disciplines. New Jersey art faculties’ thoughts from The Princeton Survey: “A studio person's research is done in the studio, not in a doctoral program. I am against it even for administration”. Another wrote, “The MFA is the appropriate terminal degree for a practicing studio artist. It is important not to separate the craft from the theory. If practitioners wish to pursue other fields, such as art education or administration, a PhD is already available in those disciplines”.

Some faculty did not totally dismiss the doctorate degree for artists, “Putting techniques in context and being able to tie work into larger contexts could be very helpful, but most of the work in a studio class is more about getting a student to achieve their desired results”. One professor that had earned a PH.D remarked, “ it has been beneficial for my career, but I believe some additional work beyond the MFA would be desirable, but not a doctorate; perhaps some certification of continued art practice, exhibitions.”

Grant (2007) asks what the advantages of a doctorate degree for an artist is besides making it easier for administrators to treat everyone the same and having students refer to their studio professors as doctor? Administrators say that studio art faculty with doctorates are “artists better versed in critical theory, which would presumably be helpful ... and the ability to teach a wider variety of such classes in art theory and art history” (Grant, p. B24). It will be interesting to see what art historians will make of this.

There is of course a down side to having artists' research and write rather than paint and create objects. Grant (2007) writes that it is doubtful that an artist can teach, research, write and create art at the same time. It could very well keep artists from creating and exhibiting their work. He suggests that we should be judging artists on their art not on academic credentials and not require programs that will keep them from doing what they were meant to do, which is to create art (para. B24). This seems like good advice but at the community college level it would be next to impossible for most hiring and tenure committees to make judgments about contemporary art. Since many community college art programs are small, it is likely committees would have to include professors and staff from outside the art department. These committee members depend on credentials and then teaching experience when selecting faculty. In addition some community colleges as of late are concerned with status so when possible they hire applicants with doctorates.

Another down side to the doctorate degree is that it works against the hiring of a more diverse faculty. The PhD in art will only serve those that can afford to pay for it, thereby eliminating many applicants that may have diverse backgrounds.

A final important point is that a doctorate for studio artists that teach in two-year colleges might be counter-productive. The mission of any art department at a two-year college is teaching students the basics, foundation drawing and design in particular. Is a doctorate degree going to produce a better teacher for those students or would an artist that has committed his life to his craft and teaching do a better job? Does one need a PhD to teach what amounts to foundation year studio courses? The debate continues to this day, but until doctorate programs in the visual arts become more widely available and requiring one becomes the norm instead of the exception it is irresponsible for administrators to deny tenure or promotion of studio faculty based on the

lack of one. Arguments that art faculty can pursue Ed.D's instead is not in the best interest of the art faculty nor the college. Administrators need to consider professional development as it applies to exhibitions, lectures and publication for visual artists seeking tenure and promotion.

Faculty that encounter problems with their colleges over their MFA degree should first present materials from NASAD and CAA (College Art Association) that explains the MFA degree, pointing out that most MFA degrees are twice the amount of credits as MA degrees. As one art faculty in the survey explained, "The MFA is much closer to a doctorate degree than most master's degrees in terms of work, thesis, and credit requirements. I feel it should be considered a doctorate. The title confers more respect in an academic environment, but I don't think it is necessary that a PhD be created in Fine Arts. That would be redundant". If administration is not of a mind to listen art faculty should seek out their faculty associations and if no help is found there proceed to regional representation. It might also be wise for arts faculty in each state to form a consortium to assist with issues of this kind. The MFA is the degree that is the expected degree for studio artists, therefore to deny tenure or promotion because of this is discriminatory. For those artists that wish to conduct research in the field of art education and or move into administrative positions an appropriate doctorate degree may make sense.

Challenge of Artist-Teachers: Relationship with Four-year Colleges

Unfortunately, it is not just the institution the arts faculty works within that can effect the art faculties' job satisfaction. The Princeton Survey depicts relationships with some four-year colleges (particularly in the State of New Jersey) as strained. In NJ only fifty-two percent of the faculty reported that their art students transferred easily to state colleges while seven-five percent of arts faculty in other states reported that their students had no trouble transferring to four-year

state colleges and universities. Reasons given by the faculty for transfer troubles: “they look down on community college art programs and the students in them; most schools accept the credits, we just have a problem with a couple of schools.” Interestingly, students have an easier time when transferring to private art colleges or universities out of state. As one professor wrote, “They can transfer easily into art school and get full credit but some local state colleges that are the closest are not giving them full credit. It does not make sense.” When asked to rank the most common reasons for transfer problems at state colleges, NJ art faculty reported that that state colleges were prejudiced against community college students and teaching. Art students are generally assessed by a portfolio but here again there were marked differences reported by the art faculty in NJ when compared to the art faculty in other states. Sixty-four percent of the art faculty in NJ felt that portfolio evaluations were arbitrary and inconsistent by the faculty member at the four-year institution. Only thirty-three percent of art faculty in other states felt this way. This prejudice towards the community college and their students appears real but in order to prove this, individual community colleges need to make a concentrated effort to gather data. As one faculty wrote, “transfer remains a vexing problem and the information is NOT institutionally researched and tracked adequately to give faculty helpful information”. If it turns out that community college students are being discriminated against it is unwarranted. According to Trachtenberg (2008) community college students that transfer to four-year universities do so successfully and do better than the students that started their education at the four-year college (p.3).

In regards to community college teaching, Linda King, now a full time art faculty member and a graduate from a community college says, “having received an AA, B.A., M.A, and an M.F.A., degree from four different schools I found that some of my best instructors were

actually from a community college. This was due to the interest and support that the faculty gave the individual student and a strong curriculum that taught basic fundamentals of art” (Cooper, p. 30). There are certainly other artists that began their careers at community colleges that are now well known to the art world. Robert Diebenkorn is one. The fact that we do not know of others that began their art educations at two-year programs needs to be rectified if artist educators want to continue to justify the existence of their art departments and gain the respect of four-year colleges. How much impact the NJ Transfer Agreement will have on this strained relationship remains to be seen. At the present time only the AA in Liberal Arts degree and the AS degree are part of the agreement, with the AFA (Associate of Fine Arts) Degree not included, again leaving the fine art student at the mercy of the four-year state college.

Devaluation of Art? Now What?

The devaluation of art appears real at least at two-year colleges in NJ. The elimination of studio courses as general education courses, the exclusion of the AFA degree from the NJ Transfer Agreement and the discrimination of art faculty due to their MFA degree are the major contributing factors that make this seem probable. Interestingly, the dismissal of art as a serious academic subject and the MFA-Doctorate degree debate seem related to one another. Although the author of this paper supports the MFA degree for artists-teachers there is a lack of research on the arts at the college level. Until art faculties become more active in research and publication (probably by pursuing doctorates) it is doubtful that we will be able to prove the value of a visual arts education at the college level and therefore will continue to fight the same battles, over and over.

The other issue is that we need more art faculty willing to move into administrative positions to voice our concerns and protect our interests.

Eighty-one percent of the faculties in all states express an interest in forming a consortium of art faculty to advocate, educate and create legislation for the betterment of the arts at two-year colleges, this seems especially important for NJ art professors.

Artist professors must take the time to integrate themselves as part of the college community and community at large and push beyond their studios. Looking for partnerships with area businesses or non-profits and creating service learning experiences for the students, again makes art more visible and reminds the institution, the students and the community of the value of the arts.

Faculty must explore other art curriculum ideas to increase enrollment. The fine arts are definitely a noble endeavor but art students must be shown ways they can apply their knowledge to support themselves as artists. This is something that many four-year art faculties are woefully inadequate at addressing or refuse to do.

The New York Times reports, applications to colleges are up, brought about by a huge population of 18-year-olds. In 2009, the largest group of high school seniors will reach 3.2 million, the highest number ever (Arenson, p. A22). Surely among these millions of students are some eager student artists that do not have the funds or the inclination to spend up to \$80,000 for the first two years of an arts education. Other students may be baby-boomers that are leaving the work force and want to continue with their life-long learning goals. If art faculty in NJ want to be valued by their institutions they are going to have to build strong art programs by going after these students. Programs with higher numbers are more respected, not so easy to ignore and in a better position to request and receive support.

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