

BY BRYAN RUTLEDGE, DIRECTOR OF COLLEGE COUNSELING, WOODWARD ACADEMY

THE VALUE OF A FINE ARTS EDUCATION

All Hands In

ARTISTS, RAISE YOUR HANDS.

You have probably heard the story about a kindergarten class being asked to raise their hands if they are artists. All hands fly up amid peals of delight. Then, a class of ninth graders is asked the same question. Maybe one or two hands cautiously appear. What happens between kindergarten and high school to still those creative hands? The answer is that students are often led to believe that fine arts are “fine” for fun and enrichment, but not for college majors or careers, and that delving deeply into fine arts will result in an unreliable and unprofitable future. Cautionary tales of starving artists struggling against impossible odds to eke out a living have inclined students to more “practical” endeavors like science, engineering, or business, which “are different from the arts”—as if knowledge were deposited like grain into sealed silos.

"IMAGINATION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN KNOWLEDGE."

It is time to break open those silos with windows of opportunity. Let's start by considering what fine arts entail. Each singer, dancer, sculptor, etc. is imbued with imagination, curiosity, and creativity, and through these windows light pours into every corner of the mind. The great scientist Albert Einstein had this to say: "Imagination is more important than

knowledge. For knowledge is limited to all we now know and understand, while imagination embraces the entire world, and all there ever will be to know and understand." Einstein is in the good company of Leonardo da Vinci, who, had he been practical and followed his father's profession, would have become a clerk. Imagine the loss, not only to art. Consider as well the phenomenal career of Dr. Michael

DeBakey, pioneering cardiovascular surgeon and medical device inventor. Dr. DeBakey credited his mother, a seamstress: "That's how I started. She saw that I was interested, so she taught me how to sew and how to cut patterns and how to use a sewing machine, how to crochet and knit and how to tat



[make lace]." Years later, when Dr. DeBakey learned that the fabric Dacron could be used to reinforce human organs, he used his wife's sewing machine to prepare the material. Dr. Debakey discovered creative ways to mend. Compelling stories continue into the 21st Century. Who can doubt the creativity of Steve Jobs

as he developed the iPhone, or Serena Williams as she reinvents tennis and entrepreneurship? The artistic mindset fuels innovation, which in turn enables all human progress.

Progressing, any fine artist can attest to the maturity, discipline, and composure cultivated by years of aesthetic study and performance; some will count teamwork, travel, and competition among the charms—and let's not forget the fun. Whether sublimely contemplating a Rothko painting or kicking up one's

heels at a hoedown, fine arts are downright fun arts! The

advent of the digital age has opened limitless

cutting-edge venues and careers in creativity. Savvy

students understand that they are more likely

to change jobs and careers than in the

past and thus approach college with

plans to diversify and combine

their fields of study. Fine arts

can be the stars in the

crown of an education

that is responsive to the

protean prospects of

the future.



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HIGHER EDUCATION EMBRACES ART.

Colleges and universities that value relevance recognize the bond between the arts and disciplines such as business, STEM, and the humanities. It is no coincidence that we observe so many Colleges of Arts and Sciences, tethered and complementary. Consider what's happening at the following schools that braid the creative and the practical.

EMERSON COLLEGE. Emerson is across the street from Boston Common and has a remarkably specialized curriculum in communications, media, business of creative enterprises, film, comedic arts,

and more. They brand themselves as a liberal arts school focusing on communications and the arts. There are programs in communications disorders, political communications, sports communications, and journalism. (Their newsroom is set up like that of The Boston Globe.) The Massachusetts Statehouse on the other side of Boston Common is a great experiential learning destination for Emerson students. Emerson presents six to eight main stage theater productions each year through Emerson Stage and has several comedy troupes and a cappella groups. In every area of the performing arts, students are integral to the planning, producing, and performing. Emerson students exude a palpable energy and eagerness for the professional arena and begin first semester studying in their major field—no dithering. They benefit

from the more than 40 colleges and universities in Boston (which collectively number over 200,000 students), and they take advantage of curricular exchange with Berklee College of Music, Massachusetts College of Art and Design, and Boston Architectural College, among others.

Internships are huge at Emerson. Graduates get jobs, and the Emerson alumni organization is integral to enabling internships and offering employment. Visiting Emerson is like viewing the future of higher education.

GEORGIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE. Georgia Tech's leaders describe architecture as "the intersection of art, culture, and technology." The College of Design is home to the BS in Architecture, Industrial Design, and Music Technology. The department chair generally describes the difference between industrial design and architecture as being the difference between designing small things, like phones, versus designing large things, like buildings. Early on, they embraced the emphasis on design thinking. Through an incubator workshop, students hatch ideas for new courses, and student recommendations might very well be implemented. Students jump in with both feet first year, with architecture course work filling about 40%-60% percent of their

curriculum. Students do physical designing ("Make something of this burlap") as well as digital designing, and a lot of cross-pollination between the two. Virtual reality is incorporated into design. A selective practicum program for undergraduates matches them with firms across the U.S. for a week, and the practicum might evolve into an internship. Naturally a BS in Architecture can lead to graduate school, but the program leaders are keen to point out that alums often successfully enter engineering, law, urban planning, fine arts, business, real estate, and construction management. Employment rates are strong, and the majority of students in Georgia Tech's diverse architecture program are women. A benefit of architecture is the smaller size compared to other on-campus departments; the implication is that, while demanding, the program is friendly and supportive, and professors are

accessible ("first name, open door"). They seek "creative problem solvers, spatial thinkers, and curious minds willing to fail." As you would expect, students with at least some background in design or art tend to land in architecture, but the first-year advisor reported that she often observes prior musical involvement as well. Study abroad is easy to arrange and available literally all over the world. During my visit there, one of the undergrads beamed that she was about to study in Greece and Italy, and there are also study options in Africa and Asia. When on GA Tech's campus, visit Architecture West to view student design models and architecture in action.

Emerson and Georgia Tech School of Architecture are only two examples of the marvelous intersection between creativity in higher education and meaningful, prosperous professions. Plenty of schools

are catching this wave, including Maryland Institute College of Art and Savannah College of Art and Design.

FINE ARTS BOOST THE APPLICATION FOR ADMISSION.

Anyone who still needs convincing when it comes to fine arts should consider the application for admission. The vast majority of colleges and universities practice holistic admission, meaning that both the student's curricular and cocurricular lives are considered. Put yourself in the place of a Director of Admissions. Would you rather admit a terrific chemistry scholar or a terrific chemistry scholar who will also play violin in the university orchestra, or play



Iago in Othello, or be drum major in the marching band? If our violinist is a competitive music conservatory candidate, she could earn not only professional training but also a music scholarship to sweeten the deal.

What's more, engagement in fine arts facilitates a college essay that fairly pops with enthusiasm, individuality, and authenticity—just what the admission/scholarship dean likes. And who can measure the benefit of fine arts for the student who struggles in some subjects yet thrives and finds a happy home in the art studio or rehearsal room? It is not extravagant to assert that fine arts have launched careers, eased defeatism, and even saved lives.

ALL HANDS IN ART.

So we see that creativity and practicality are not silos but rivers that converge. (Indeed, we prefer the designer of the lovely bridge we traverse to be good at geometry.) Creativity is everywhere, even when we do not call it such. It is the novel we escape to, the song that reminds us of our first date, the child's watercolor on the refrigerator, the hymn we choose for a loved one's memorial service, the bright graffiti on the walls of city buildings, the "crystal stair" in Langston Hughes's poem "Mother to Son." So join our wise kindergarteners and raise your happy hand, for they remind us that art is the child of life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryan Rutledge has served as director of college counseling at Woodward Academy since July 2015.

Previously, he was director of college counseling at St. John's School in Houston, TX, for 19 years, and director of college guidance at Wyoming Seminary College Preparatory School, Kingston, PA, for six years. He has taught AP English, Southern Literature, Civil War history, and philosophy, all on the high school level. He holds an M.A. in philosophy from the University of Virginia and a B.A. in sociology/psychology and philosophy from Millsaps College. He oversees a staff of five college counselors and an administrative coordinator.

