

# Why Art Center?

## Measuring the Value of Art and Design Education

Lorne M. Buchman

In his 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama challenged college and university presidents to justify the value of their institutions' programs to the American public. His challenge grows out of bipartisan national discussions about how to evaluate higher education and provide consumers with data that allow them to make better, more informed, choices. Who, after all, does not want to know with certainty that a particular college will provide a high-quality educational experience that "pays off" after graduation?<sup>1</sup>

Since hearing the President's remarks, I have been contemplating the value of an Art Center education and the ways in which it might be possible to measure that value. I would like to share my thoughts and ideas with you, our Art Center community. This is the first in a series of essays that I intend to write about the future of higher education and the transformation taking place at Art Center.





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This topic, the value of an Art Center education, is a complex one. How can it be evaluated? The income our graduates earn after they complete their degrees is one obvious metric. Their employment rate (91 percent of 2010 graduates<sup>2</sup>) is another. But do these measurements offer meaningful insight into the ways an art or design education—and a life spent in creative endeavors—can translate into benefits for the individual? For the public good?

We know, after all, that higher education plays a key role in invigorating our economy and growing and redefining the U.S. workforce to remain competitive on a global stage. Rightly, the president includes higher education as an essential component of his “blueprint for an economy that is meant to last—an economy built on American manufacturing, American energy, skills for American workers, and a renewal of American values.”<sup>3</sup> I believe that Art Center’s tradition of education—and even more significantly the educational experience we are now shaping for our students under our strategic plan—answers directly the president’s challenge and resonates with the broader themes of his blueprint. Yet I also believe that attempting to measure educational value, especially in ways that have been applied to K–12 education, may reveal more about the limitations of the metric than it does about the value we offer.

Understanding the true value of an Art Center education requires stepping back from the question of how a particular degree may provide financial benefits for the graduate and examining the relevance of design and art education more broadly. Almost daily, reports from industry attribute business growth and success to the power of design. Increasingly, employers seek to fill leadership roles with creative professionals who can work collaboratively, adapt to change and have expertise across industry type and sector. In an article for *Fastcodesign.com*, Bruce Nussbaum, professor of innovation and design at Parsons The New School for Design, cites an emerging trend of designers driving American entrepreneurialism:

The encouraging news is that we are seeing a dynamic expansion of the scale, range, and power of traditional design. It promises to revive the broken VC model, [and] capture the imagination and energy of a new generation of young designers/creators...<sup>4</sup>

The Pew Charitable Trusts recently reported on the “New Work” that will drive future economies and the significance of the creative imagination in today’s job market:

The creative jobs that drive innovation are now the highest ‘value added’ jobs in the world.... If states are going to stay competitive, they have to...develop a workforce capable of doing creative work.<sup>5</sup>

The need to prepare our nation’s youth for work that requires imaginative thinking is fueling efforts to restore depth and balance to a K–12 education system. In the debate over reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, an increasing number of educational collectives, government agencies, and nonprofits are emphasizing core standards that have been at the heart of Art Center’s approach for decades: a curriculum focused

1 Derek Thompson synthesizes several ways to quantify this pay off in “What’s More Expensive Than College? Not Going to College,” *The Atlantic*, March 2012.

2 Art Center’s Office of Career Development conducts an Annual Graduate Employment Survey. The most recent survey, completed in 2011, measured employment of 2010 graduates and had a response rate of 53 percent.

3 “President Obama’s Blueprint for Keeping College Affordable and Within Reach for All Americans,” January 27, 2012, available at [www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/27/fact-sheet-president-obama-s-blueprint-keeping-college-affordable-and-wi](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/01/27/fact-sheet-president-obama-s-blueprint-keeping-college-affordable-and-wi).

4 “Designers Are The New Drivers of American Entrepreneurialism,” [www.fastcodesign.com/1665120/designers-are-the-new-drivers-of-american-entrepreneurialism](http://www.fastcodesign.com/1665120/designers-are-the-new-drivers-of-american-entrepreneurialism), October 2011.

5 Laura Seargeant Richardson, “The Creativity Crisis: Why American Schools Need Design,” *The Atlantic*, March 2011.

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on creativity and real-world projects (with industry and community partners), team work, problem-solving, deep research, work with multiple sources of information, and the capacity to entertain several questions simultaneously as a path toward innovation.<sup>6</sup> As the conversation about educational reform turns to methods we have pioneered, refined, and continually work to perfect, the College offers a wealth of practical experience to K–12 leaders.

So the value of art and design education—and the value that Art Center as an institution brings to the world—is far greater than what can be measured by the incomes of our graduates. Comparisons of college costs, graduation rates, employment statistics, and potential earnings of graduates provide valuable information to prospective students and their families, but these metrics do not fully measure the impact higher education has on society. They must be complemented by an understanding of the greater good a college can do to address the important issues of our time.

It is no secret that the creative imagination is the differentiator in civilizations of great enterprise, of innovation in business, of technological interface. Creativity has the power to change the way people live and interact, what they study, how they integrate life experience, and how they might “heal a fractured world.”<sup>7</sup> For example, if “the medium is the message,”<sup>8</sup> then the design of the now ubiquitous media in our lives has never been more critical.<sup>9</sup> Art Center educates those individuals—graphic and interaction designers, product and environmental designers, entertainment designers and filmmakers, photographers, illustrators and visual artists—who know how to create change and to produce knowledge that can only come from making.

For students, what is the value of an education that prepares them to solve complex problems by generating new ideas, exploring them through making, seeking feedback to refine them, and understanding their connection to society and the environment? The answer is more qualitative than quantitative. Ultimately, the success of our students’ creative solutions is determined by the experience of their intended audience—if it addresses a need or stimulates new ways of thinking, the idea will be adopted, iterated, and perhaps evolve. If not, it’s left behind. This approach to evaluation also applies to our product. The full value of an Art Center education to our graduates is its continuing relevance throughout lifelong practice of creative professions.

As the national debate about the cost and benefits of higher education unfolds in the coming months, I will be in touch periodically to share my thoughts about how Art Center can make the most of the core strengths that have long distinguished the educational experience we offer our students and that continue to define our graduates. Each day, the College finds new opportunities to address the challenges of our time. The support of our community of alumni, parents and friends enables us to respond with thoughtful, elegant and eminently useful solutions. Thank you for helping us demonstrate the true value of an Art Center education. ●

Lorne M. Buchman  
President, Art Center College of Design

<sup>6</sup> For particulars of the dialogue in California, see “ConnectEd,” [www.connectedcalifornia.org](http://www.connectedcalifornia.org); and the James Irvine Foundation’s “Linked Learning” initiative, [irvine.org/grantmaking/our-programs/youth/linked-learning](http://irvine.org/grantmaking/our-programs/youth/linked-learning). For a general overview, see for example “Partnerships for the 21st Century Skills,” [www.p21.org/overview/skills-framework](http://www.p21.org/overview/skills-framework); see also Report to The Secretary of State for Education from the National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education: “All Our Futures: Creativity, Culture and Education,” available at [www.scribd.com/doc/62829255/All-Our-Futures-Creativity-Culture-and-Education](http://www.scribd.com/doc/62829255/All-Our-Futures-Creativity-Culture-and-Education).

<sup>7</sup> See Jonathan Sacks, *To Heal a Fractured World: The Ethics of Responsibility* (Schocken Books, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw Hill, 1964, reissued by MIT Press, 1994, and Gingko Press, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> For a solid analysis of this issue, see Kevin Kelly, “Becoming Screen Literate,” *The New York Times*, November 21, 2008.