The Arts in Higher Education: Revaluing the Intangible

This is a great honor, and one I scarcely could have imagined a year ago. To have been asked to serve as dean of one of the university’s six distinguished arts schools by President Nikias and Provost Garrett is particularly gratifying, as these two visionary leaders have focused the attention of the entire university community – indeed, the entire nation – on the transformative power of the arts. They have made an unprecedented commitment of university resources to a series of groundbreaking programs and initiatives that have reaffirmed for all of us the unique capacity of the creative and performing arts to communicate in ways that need no translation, and that are at once local and global; specific and universal. I pledge today to honor that commitment and the work that has begun here, and to champion making the arts a critical and integral part of the academic experience of each and every student at the University of Southern California.

President Nikias recognized a number of our distinguished guests today. I, too, would like to acknowledge and offer my thanks to the USC trustees and senior administrators, fellow deans, and faculty and staff here today. I am grateful for your support, and honored by your presence. In particular, I want to thank Ed and Gayle Roski, whose generosity and foresight have given the school its foundation for the future. I look forward to continuing to work closely with Gayle and all of the members of the USC Roski Board of Councilors, a group that provides essential input on the school’s strategic vision, and for which I am grateful at every turn.

I must also recognize the faculty and staff that I call my “other minds,” the senior leadership team at the Roski School: Margaret Lazzari, Ann Page, Haven Lin Kirk, Christine Rahn, Penny Jones, Erin Connors, Ian McCully, Douglas Matthews, and our most recent additions, Lynn Miles and Susan Metros. They are in the trenches with me on a daily basis, and they consistently amaze me with their ability to adapt to the constantly changing landscape that is an arts school.

Additionally, I offer my sincerest thanks to the entire Roski faculty, to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude. As artists, educators, and colleagues, they inspire new ideas, challenge
assumptions, and fuel a healthy debate that keeps us all honest. And they work miracles to keep what we do at a level of extraordinary artistry.

It is particularly nice to welcome so many members of not just the Trojan Family, but also my actual family: my husband Mark Borchetta, my son Ryan, my mother-in-law Shari, and my brothers and sisters and their families. They are all my closest support system, and it means a great deal to me to be able to share this milestone in my life with them.

Last, but by no means least, though they were not able to join us today I want to acknowledge my newest collaborators, Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young (Dr. Dre). The USC Iovine and Young Academy for Arts, Technology, and the Business of Innovation opens its doors to its first class of students in fall of 2014, but it is already proving itself a transformational presence at USC. Fostering collaboration between record numbers of schools and disciplines, the Academy is generating in all who are contributing to its development a sense of eager anticipation for its revolutionizing potential.

The Art of Leadership

Like many creative artists, I can look back at my life and identify several distinct periods of output. My early career was highlighted by extended periods in France and Italy, the completion of my first two academic degrees, and my first significant commissions and performances as a composer.

The second stage of my career included my doctorate, my faculty appointment and tenure at USC, and a marked change in my musical style that was brought about by a turn away from my more Euro-centric training, and toward my west-coast roots. The positive critical reception to this new musical style took me into a third stage, one that brought enough of a sense of having arrived that I felt free to pick and choose between opportunities as a composer, and thus to renew work in areas of interdisciplinary scholarship that had been previously set aside. This period was also marked by a growing sense of obligation to look outside of myself, and to seek more extensive ways and means of giving back to the profession and the academic community that had given so much to me.

The last five years, as a result, has been a time of distinct self-exploration and renewed growth, the results of which fueled my desire to explore the many rich connections across the
arts, and set me permanently on a path of service to others. As a journey, it hasn’t always been
easy; in fact, at times it’s been decidedly difficult. But, fortunately, I have not taken it alone.
The Trojan Family that embraced me in 1985 has continued to mentor me through each and
every obstacle. And it has given me opportunities that have allowed me to expand my work in
ways I never thought possible, and that have been enormously fulfilling.

**Once a Trojan, a Trojan for Life**

In a sense, I have grown up at USC. My dear friend and colleague from the Thornton
School, Professor Terry Cravens, likes to joke that he's been at USC long enough to remember
when the Trojan Marching Band was so small they could only spell out the "U." I haven't been
here quite that long, but I do very clearly remember a time when the School of Cinematic Arts
actually envied the School of Music's facilities. As a student, faculty, and now an administrator
I have watched the university's transformation into a research and creative powerhouse, and one
of the most respected institutions in the world.

Today, under the leadership of C. L. Max Nikias, USC has embarked upon its most
exciting era yet, and one in which we are truly becoming "the envy of the world." In the last
three years records have been smashed, ceilings broken, and the standard for higher education
has become no longer just gold, but cardinal and gold. With the launch of an historic $6 billion
dollar campaign, we are in a time of transformative gifts that fund new modes of scholarship and
pioneering scientific research, and we are in a place where the arts are honored as perhaps never
before in this country. More importantly, at USC the arts have been positioned and challenged to
integrate with other disciplines in ways that will mean nothing less than new paradigms in
education and creative research.

“Some of my best friends are artists…”

American choreographer Twyla Tharp said, “Art is the only way to run away without
leaving home.” If that is true, then it is a logical next step to conclude that art is what we, as
human beings, naturally run toward. One only has to look at the recent photos taken of the rather
sophisticated replicas of artworks so painstakingly recreated by farmers in the rice fields of Japan
to know that this is true. And yet, in the pre-college educational systems of most modern societies, the arts are still seen as no more than a curricular add-on. After decimating the music and art programs in primary education public schools for decades, administrators in this country seem once again to agree that arts training has value, though that value is still perceived as not equal to that of the humanities and sciences, at least in terms of future employability (never mind significant contributions to society). Finally, this idea is breaking down.

Stanford’s interdisciplinary think tank, the “d” School, is founded on a premise called design thinking, a concept that identifies the unique methodology employed by designers as rife with natural problem solving power, and applicable to any issue. A few years ago the College of Visual and Performing Arts and the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University began an initiative called Common Ground that investigates the effects of what they term “artistic modes of thinking” on the scientific method. More and more, studies are looking at the connection between arts-based training and practice and a wide variety of areas with unusual creative components, from leadership to disruptive innovation. While the concept is not strictly new — in 2005 author Daniel Pink posited the idea that right-brain thinking would inherit the future — it is finally gaining speed.

What does this mean for the Roski School of Fine Arts?

The Future of the Roski School of Fine Arts

There are several initiatives that, with the support of my faculty colleagues at the Roski School, I will continue to advance as dean.

Undergraduate Education

First is the revitalization of the undergraduate art and design experience. The Roski School is already a philosophical leader among art schools via its intra-disciplinary approach to the Bachelor of Fine Arts degree. Whereas the prevalent educational model directs students to choose a specialization within the arts, our students have long been able to move across the different visual media — painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, and others — to craft wholly individual practices. The school is also nationally recognized for its strong focus on
multimedia art making, a practice that combines visual art with other media such as sound, moving images, speech, or live performance. But, there is more to do.

Across the spectrum of arts education, the scope of traditional studio instruction is changing. The methodology of discipline-specific, skills-based training is being enhanced by a newer approach that more fully integrates theory with multi-disciplinary arts practice, and emphasizes the intellectual and cultural preparation of our students. For the Roski School, this means a distinct advantage nationally, but only if we are able to adopt an educational model that effectively leverages our position in a major research university. To that end, the current Bachelor of Fine Arts and Bachelor of Arts degrees will undergo a restructuring of their required coursework that will provide a common critical foundation and theoretical basis for advanced work. This will include a strong look at the social, cultural and political consequences of art, and the processes and reasons for making. Further, it is essential that both degrees, and not just the Bachelor of Arts, offer students the opportunity to augment their program of study with coursework in other schools. The benefits that may be gained from exposure to faculty and students in disciplines across the university are immeasurable, and must be explored even for those artists who are most focused on a creative practice.

Lastly, as students are encouraged to explore the power of synthesizing multiple art forms, the curriculum must offer not just a brief look at the aesthetics and languages of the other arts via individual lectures or discussions, but a fully integrated and in-depth study of creative practice outside the visual arts. Akin to this is the need for students to have greater access to diverse thinking in an atmosphere of aesthetic pluralism.

Let me be clear that with these new emphases – on social and cultural context for making art, on greater attention to modes of artistic expression and to academic breadth – comes demanding more of our students. More hard work, greater rigor and increased expectations for excellence. Our students are that good and, through the outstanding work of our colleagues at the USC Office of Admission, they are getting even better every year.

With two searches in preparation for this year, new senior faculty hires in Critical Studies and Fine Arts will invigorate this effort, and support the excellent work of our existing faculty.
Design
A second initiative is focused on the expansion of design offerings at the Roski School, including in the areas of 3-dimensional design and design theory. Benchmarking data on common traits among the country’s top university-based visual art schools reveal this: all feature top-ranked and extensive design programs, most especially at the graduate level. The various programs offer a virtual smorgasbord of design disciplines, including graphic, industrial, spatial or environmental, communication, fashion and more. The precise menu of selections at each individual institution is immaterial; they have all undoubtedly chosen what works for their location and demographic. What is relevant, however, is the fact that almost without exception these design programs exist within broader fine arts contexts, rather than as separate entities, which I believe is design’s rightful place.

Design’s unique methodologies also make it the perfect interdisciplinary player. Current academic partners for our design area at Roski include the Viterbi School of Engineering, the School of Cinematic Arts, the Marshall School of Business, the Annenberg School of Communications and Journalism, and, very soon, the Iovine and Young Academy, and the Broad Center for Regenerative Medicine and Stem Cell Research; but, opportunities for collaboration with other areas are virtually limitless. New offerings from the Roski School in 3-dimensional design, graphic design in fashion marketing, rapid visualization, and design theory, all supported by a major expansion in 3-dimensional rapid prototyping technologies, promise to offer a new world of opportunity for students across USC.

It is clear to all of us at the Roski School that, as the scope of the undergraduate design program expands, we also need to think toward graduate offerings and, eventually, an MFA in design. Further, if we wish to be among the undisputed leaders in design education, we need to grow beyond the excellent work that is already being done in our classrooms, and create an environment for serious research. To aid this effort, I have authorized an immediate third search for a senior faculty member in design. This person will lead our efforts in dimensional design and design theory, and help to envision the school’s research agenda and our future MFA.
USC Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young Academy

This brings me to a third initiative, of which I'm sure you are aware: the USC Jimmy Iovine and Andre Young Academy for Arts, Technology and the Business of Innovation.

The Academy’s premise is simple. It’s about accommodating the student that has grown up in the midst of a technological revolution that has changed the way we think, work, play and learn. But it's also about the cultural revolution that is now changing the way we relate to each other, the way we share ideas, and even how and why we create. And it's about the arts, and nurturing what challenges our thoughts, inspires our actions, and may very well be the best of what we have to offer as human beings.

The Academy's curriculum is designed to give students a broad-based understanding of the nature of innovation, and of the factors that brought about each moment in history when society changed course because of an idea. It is also designed to grow the capacity to see when and how that next moment might occur and to develop the intellectual sensibilities and tools needed to move the culture in new directions, even directions that people aren’t yet aware they desperately want. The coursework contains a strong emphasis on global culture, and on design as a global language; on artistic and aesthetic discernment, and making and creating in both analog and digital formats. With its focus on nurturing future generations of innovators in any field, the Academy’s training will provide a strong foundation in the language, techniques and technologies of visual, structural, and spatial design; business and marketplace strategies; communication; creative computing; and the audio arts. But we believe that list will grow.

As you may have heard, the Academy's four-year curriculum culminates in an experience that we call "The Garage." Self-directed teams of students, guided by faculty and industry mentors, will move into a specially designed educational space that will offer access to cutting-edge technology for the purpose of envisioning and rendering new products, technologies, art forms, and modes or models of doing business. And here’s an exciting piece of news: the Garage was originally planned to open in 2017, in time for the first class of seniors in the Academy. I’m very pleased to announce that President Nikias and Provost Garrett have graciously and generously identified an interim home for the Garage on the fourth floor of Tudor Campus Center, the magnificent centerpiece of student life at USC. The designs are already in the works, and we will be able to watch this beautiful space take shape over the course of the coming year, and open its doors for our inaugural class of freshmen next fall.
The synergies between the Roski School and the Academy are many and they are powerful. And they will allow our students and faculty in both institutions to prosper. Why am I so sure of this? I have spent my life as a creative artist. As the Academy's Executive Director, I have spent the last year immersed in the creative mindset of the super-innovator. Something I have learned that I know will not be terribly surprising to anyone here is that these two beings are remarkably similar. Through historical hindsight we know that the most revered artists of any age, those whose work forever changed the way we see, hear, feel and think, were rarely successful in their own lifetimes. In some cases these visionaries' ideas were so radical, and so far out in front of contemporary thought, it took generations, even centuries for the world to catch up. They followed their passions with total conviction, and took risks that too often cost them their social standing, their livelihood, and even their freedom.

Recent research shows us that super-innovators are also by nature inclined to play by no one's rules but their own and, as a result, the benefit of their work is often equally difficult to quickly identify and quantify. Like artists, they work outside established boundaries, utilizing whatever path of least resistance will get them to their goal. They are undaunted by failure, passionate, driven, and not afraid to take risks.

There was a time when the undergraduate college or university education was by its very structure oppositional to this type of thinker. It is certainly one of the reasons that arts education was traditionally the purview of independent schools that specialized in the arts. By its dedication to new modes of interdisciplinary research and education, and to the arts, USC has created an environment for innovation to thrive. That is why I am convinced that the artistic ethos of the Roski School will be as integral to the ethos of the Iovine and Young Academy as our new Academy will be to Roski. Both will benefit in ways that I think none of us can predict.

Revaluing the Intangible

As we move forward to create an educational environment that will not only nurture future artists and innovators but that will also carry arts-based thinking, arts-based connectivity into virtually every discipline, every classroom, it is imperative that we fully appreciate what this means. As this great university has shown us, it means revaluing the intangible. It means an environment that nurtures ‘blue sky thinking’ without concern for an end result. It means
encouraging work that has no immediately apparent value in the marketplace, and that may initially serve no other purpose than to take us by the scruff of the neck and focus our attention on something that either is or should be better. It means a hands-on and individualized approach to teaching. And it means rethinking the paradigm of the perfect college student and embracing, in the words of Steve Jobs, "... the crazy ones — the misfits, the rebels, the troublemakers, the round pegs in the square holes…"

In his commencement address this past May, Jimmy Iovine said, “Think about this: Everything you know could already be wrong.” What he meant was, don’t assume anything. As educators we mustn’t assume anything, especially that we actually know more than our students. Today, as we are lecturing and imparting information, students are fact-checking us online. Most of them come to us already having created major projects in the arts or other fields — films, music videos, documentaries, apps, working prototypes, and more — and having researched, funded, marketed, and disseminated them via the web or social media. High schools are focusing more and more on harnessing and nurturing natural entrepreneurial ability, and middle school projects now carry a level of engineering sophistication previously unimagined, such as models for clean energy and submersibles made out of drainpipes.

Can we still teach them? Of course we can. Time on the planet gives us wisdom and experience that will always be not just valuable but invaluable. But our primary role must move from imparting information to guiding, counseling, critiquing, and mentoring. And letting these gifted students that we have worked so hard to find show us the way.

In closing, I want to offer again my thanks to you, President Nikias, and to you, Provost Garrett. I look forward to partnering with you, the USC Trustees, and the faculty, staff, friends and supporters of the Gayle Garner Roski School of Fine Arts in this remarkable time of transformation.

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i The Trojan Marching Band has had a long tradition of lining up in formation to spell out a large “USC” on the field during football games.

ii The USC School of Cinematic Arts has undergone a massive expansion in recent years, and now boasts one of the most impressive and technologically advanced facilities in higher education arts.

iii In his article, “Elements of America’s Renaissance” (San Diego Union-Tribune, March 12, 2009), USC provost C.L. Max Nikias wrote, “Wall Street is no longer the envy of the world, nor are our elementary and public school systems—but our top 50 research universities most certainly are, as they continue to draw the top domestic and foreign minds who end up driving our economy forward.”
iv Syracuse University Chancellor and President Nancy Cantor, from her keynote address, “Inciting Insight: Situating the Arts in Higher Education,” given at a conference titled “Art-Making, the Arts, and the Research University,” hosted by ArtsEngine, University of Michigan, May 4-6, 2011.