

W. JOSEPH KING

# A Creative Legacy

**To serve Generation Z and beyond, liberal arts colleges must redouble their efforts to build on their imaginative and innovative foundations**

WHEN I WAS AN UNDERGRADUATE in the early 1990s at Southwestern University, two faculty advisors encouraged me to explore my interests in psychology and computer science, specifically nonverbal behavior in human-computer interaction. Over my next two years at Southwestern, a liberal arts college located near Austin, Texas, I conducted extensive library research, applied for a Sigma Xi undergraduate research grant, created an ad hoc laboratory, built instrumentation, programmed simulations, ran experiments, and generally had a great time. Ultimately, the project evolved into an honors thesis and led to my first peer-reviewed conference paper, on facial expressions in the human interface, which I presented in Japan in 1993. I also gained a level of self-assurance and resourcefulness I had never had before.

An even more profound experience came as the result of a class I had avoided since the day I arrived on campus. By my senior year, I still had not taken a required course in fine arts performance, and I was left with choosing between ballet (a nightmare for my pudgy and uncoordinated self) and drama (equally terrifying for the introverted nerd that I am). I signed up for drama, and it was as bad as I thought it would be: voice exercises, acting techniques, improvisation. For the final project, I had to recite a three-minute monologue on a raised platform at the front of the room, no less terrifying than being on an actual stage. But when the time arrived, despite my initial panic, I was surprised at how easily the words came. I was acting. Even more astonishing, my performance moved the audience.

I cannot understate the confidence that resulted from that moment. I would not have been on the founding team of F5 Networks, taking the company public and ultimately replacing Kodak on the S&P 500, if I had not taken that drama class. That monologue and my honors project gave me the courage and the creative, innovative, and entrepreneurial tools that I needed to be successful.

As president of Lyon College, my goal is to provide an equally powerful, mentored experience to the students of today and tomorrow. And it is not just imperative for Lyon to carry on its liberal arts legacy. Liberal arts colleges and universities have never been more relevant to future students and their careers, and these institutions continue to lead the way in providing incoming generations with a critical intellectual and creative foundation.

## **Freedom of thought**

Founded in the American colonies and later on the frontier, the nation's liberal arts colleges were charged with providing a broad-based education that would prepare students for a wide variety of professions. These early institutions looked to the ancient Greeks and Romans, who, keenly aware that a successful republic required creative free thinkers, developed *artes liberales*—subjects and skills worthy of a free person. In the new American Republic, liberty, freedom, and freethinking were paramount concerns of an educated citizen. This is the basis of the liberal arts college, but it is just the beginning. The frontier is a perpetual process of reinvention and renewal that brings us to the

## MY VIEW

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modern liberal arts college, an institution deeply committed to creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurial spirit. These skills are often cited among the top abilities sought by twenty-first-century employers, along with critical thinking, leadership, communication, and collaboration.

The incoming generation of college students—Gen Z—embodies this spirit. The members of this group have been steeped in building, simulation, and gaming their entire lives. Born between 1997 and 2012,<sup>1</sup> with the oldest already on our campuses, they have created vast structures and machines in Minecraft, developed elaborate strategies in Dota 2, and built complicated objects using 3D printers. At school—in addition to singing in the choir, playing on the

basketball team, or competing with the debate club—they learned to design web pages, build robots for competitions, and tell stories with video.

Authenticity and the value of experience matter to them.<sup>2</sup> In a 2016 Adobe survey, 77 percent of Gen Z respondents in the United States said that they felt a variety of jobs required creativity.<sup>3</sup> During their professional careers, they will hold several of these kinds of jobs (some of which do not yet exist), move between industries, continue their professional development, and seek out lifelong learning opportunities. Members of the baby boom generation held nearly twelve jobs during their careers,<sup>4</sup> and members of Gen Z could hold even more.

Liberal arts colleges and universities are at the forefront of preparing students to navigate this future world of work and have aggressively integrated creative inquiry into their student experiences. In 2007, Oberlin College established a Creativity and Leadership program “designed to encourage students to put their innovative ideas into practice.”<sup>5</sup> It has subsequently grown into the Center for Innovation and Impact. In 2008, Middlebury College established the MiddCORE program to support idea creation, design, collaboration, strategic thinking, leadership, and persuasive communication. One 2015 participant reflected, “I’m no longer afraid to take risks or put myself in uncomfortable yet growth-fostering situations. I am a stronger, more confident, more empowered version of myself.”<sup>6</sup> At Beloit College, the Center for Entrepreneurship in Liberal Education,

established in 2004, helps students “originate, plan, and execute their own entrepreneurial projects . . . [and] develop the skills necessary for self-employment through actual practice.”<sup>7</sup> In all three examples, the colleges have found ways to foster creativity and innovation through programs that supplement the curriculum in substantive ways. This gives students the freedom to grow through self-directed, creative inquiry.

Providing financial support and structure can also go a long way. At Princeton University, the Martin A. Dale ’53 Summer Awards give selected sophomores a stipend “to pursue worthy projects that provide important opportunities for personal growth, foster independence, creativity, and leadership skills, and broaden or deepen some area of special interest.”<sup>8</sup> At Lehigh University, the Mountaintop Initiative offers both summer funding and a special space—a former Bethlehem Steel research laboratory atop South Mountain—to support creative and innovative projects of students who apply via a competitive process. Faculty members serve as mentors, and student responses have been very positive. “You are the master of your own fate,” 2014 Lehigh graduate Ivy Ochieng said in describing her experience at Mountaintop. “You make the rules.”<sup>9</sup>

Most liberal arts colleges and universities have embedded creative inquiry into their signature core programs. The College of Wooster’s APEX program seeks to integrate student learning, linking the wider world to creative and critical inquiry. At Washington & Jefferson College, the Magellan Project provides students working on individually conceived projects with funding and faculty support in the summer. At Allegheny College, the Gateway program provides a support structure for students to explore their own creative interests and apply what they learn. At Lyon College, we are in the process of revitalizing our core by embedding creativity, innovation, and interdisciplinary thought across all four years of the student experience. Our goal, like those of our peer institutions, is to provide a sandbox where students can grow through intellect and innovation.

### **A creative circle**

Back in that drama class at Southwestern University, the professor challenged us to put more of our creative selves into the exercises. My fellow students and I slowly came to understand that any character that emerged from our performances

### **Authenticity and the value of experience matter to members of Gen Z.**



Photo courtesy of Jason Jones/Southwestern University

**Class of 2016 Southwestern University student Kelsey Baker unites the principles of mathematics and computer science in the form of large-scale oil paintings. The pictorial compositions aim to inspire visceral, emotional responses from the viewer.**

came entirely from our imaginations. We learned to trust our creative instincts. That was one of the most important lessons of my life, and I am not sure I would have learned it any other way.

In 2000, I endowed a creativity fund at Southwestern to foster this same sort of self-discovery. Its purpose is to support innovative and visionary projects of enrolled students, supporting multiple projects every academic year with grant awards ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars.

Since its inception, the fund has supported nearly two hundred independent, curricular, and cocurricular projects. The range of topics has been exceptionally broad. Students have designed and built electric cellos, Tesla fans, and thermal solar refrigerators. They have developed algorithms to drive the composition

of large-scale paintings and perfect pottery glaze. They have sculpted, painted, sung, danced, and performed all manner of theatrical productions. One group formed a drum corps—the lack of a football team and marching band notwithstanding—to boost school spirit. There has been a peace conference, a teen summit, arts festivals, and a television station.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, through the creativity fund, students have conducted dozens of scientific studies, ranging from lucid-dream induction and chimpanzee social learning to sonic desalination and serotonin analysis. Graduates have gone on to be scientists, artists, doctors, entrepreneurs, teachers, lawyers, and diplomats, to name just a few of their varied professions.

The fund is one example of the ways in which liberal arts colleges highlight how creative inquiry shapes and encourages the intersection of critical and original thought and remains essential even with the radical changes in global society.

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**Class of 2016 Southwestern University students Julia Sykora and Allison Young at work on their King Creativity Fund project “3D Mathematical Models for the Blind,” which will help engage math learners with physical impairments.**

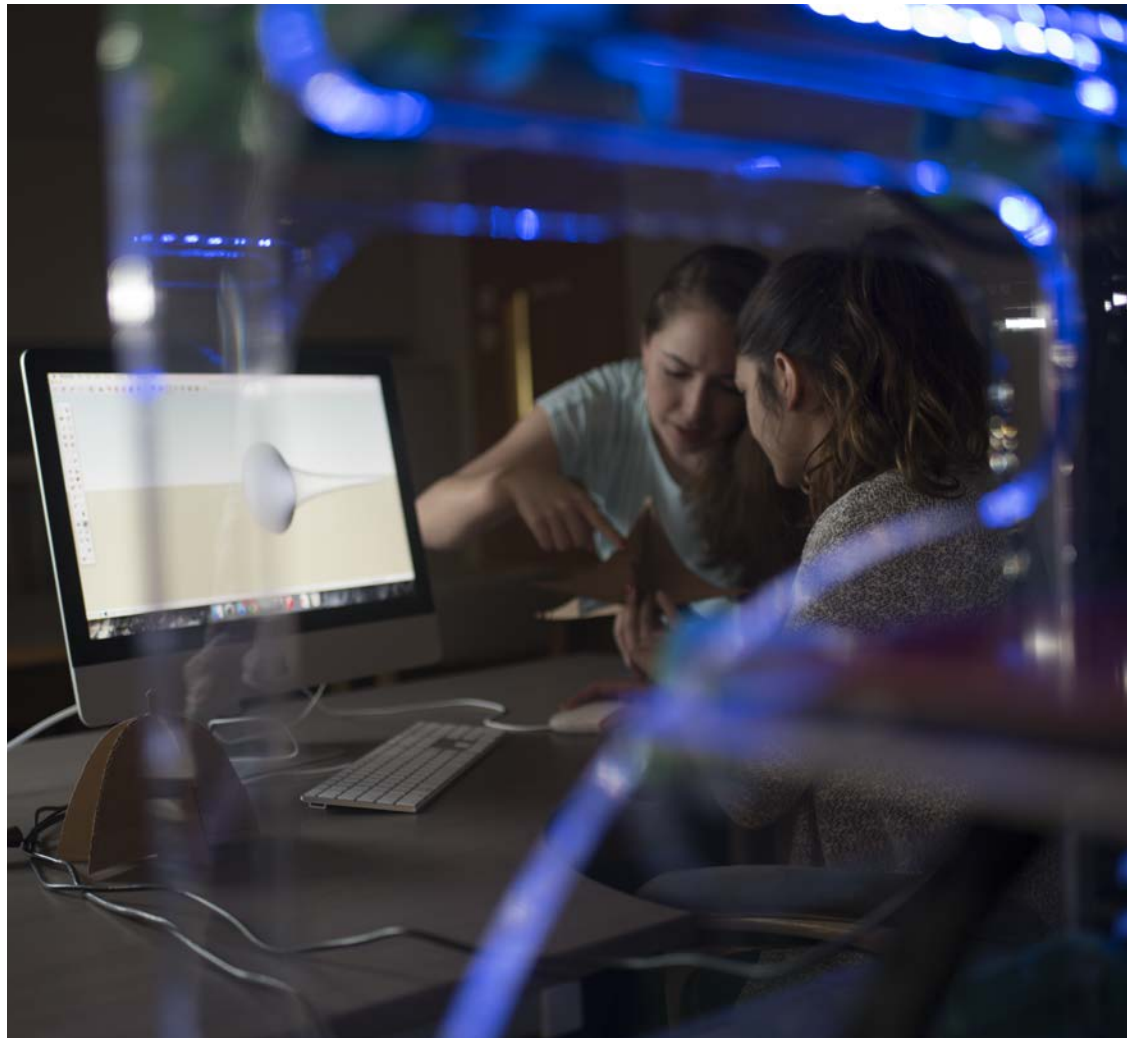


Photo courtesy of Kendra Lewellyn/Southwestern University

As Taylor Hutchison, a 2016 Southwestern graduate now studying for a doctorate in astronomy, wrote to me, “I really don’t think that I would have had the same opportunities if I had not been able to participate [in these creative activities] for two years of my undergraduate career.” Like Taylor, I do not think I would have had the same opportunities, either. That is why I have devoted my career to creativity and liberal education. In combination, they are a powerful force in preparing this generation of students and many generations to come. <sup>LE</sup>

#### NOTES

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