Where are the Arts in the Liberal Arts?
Report of the Working Committee on The Arts at Amherst

Representatives from the departments of Fine Arts, Music, and Theater and Dance met over the summer of 2005 at the request of the President to discuss our shared goals for the Visual and Performing arts at Amherst. After further discussion with our departmental colleagues, we summarized our initial conclusions for the CAP. We decided to form a working committee on the arts, with members from each of the three departments, plus additional faculty from the Dean’s Advisory Committee on Film and Video arts. While there is fundamental agreement on the critical basic issues, our full report is still a work in progress. We also plan to include representatives from the Advisory Committee on Creative Writing in future discussions. This preliminary report to the CAP and the Amherst Faculty is an update on our thinking concerning the role of the practice of the arts in the Amherst curriculum, and the place of artist-faculty in our common enterprise.

The basic issues that the committee is agreed on are listed as follows:

1. That the practice of the arts (in contrast to historical and critical study of the arts) is under-represented.

2. That artistic practice is a unique and fundamental mode of thinking and of knowledge, comparable at the basic level to quantitative and verbal practice.

3. That Amherst has historically tended to marginalize the arts generally and that though much has changed, especially in the area of historical and critical study, it has a long way to go with respect to taking artistic practice seriously.

4. That those in the arts fields at Amherst have committed themselves to integrating the practice of the arts with the historical and critical study of them, but curricular innovation is limited by the under-representation of practicing artists on the faculty.

5. That the College should live up to its catalog copy by providing sufficient opportunities for students to select courses which “engage in creative action - doing, making and performing.” Faculty teaching introductory courses in the practice of the arts must turn large numbers of students away each semester due to over-enrollment.

6. That those in the arts fields believe that Amherst has an opportunity to become a leader among comparable institutions with respect to taking the practice of arts seriously and integrating it across the curriculum as a whole.

The Departments of Fine Arts, Music, and Theater and Dance agree on the pedagogical value of integrating historical, critical, and theoretical scholarship with theory and practice in the liberal arts curriculum. The SCAE report of May 16, 2003 addressed the problem of uneven preparation in writing and quantitative skills, and the ways in which lack of those skills deprives some students of full access to our open curriculum. While only a relatively small percentage of
admitted students are seriously under-prepared in writing and quantitative skills, our experience is that the great majority of our students arrive with a serious lack of preparation in the disciplines of the practice of the arts. This reflects the systemic neglect of the arts in American education.

Rudolf Arnheim, Professor Emeritus of Psychology of Art, Harvard University, has noted:

Our entire educational system continues to be based on the study of words and numbers. In kindergarten, to be sure, our youngsters learn by seeing and handling handsome shapes, and invent their own shapes on paper or in clay by thinking through perceiving. But with the first grade of elementary school the senses begin to lose educational status. More and more the arts are considered as a training in agreeable skills, as entertainment and mental release. As the ruling disciplines stress more rigorously the study of words and numbers, their kinship with the arts is increasingly obscured, and the arts are reduced to a desirable supplement; fewer and fewer hours of the week can be spared from the study of the subjects that, in everybody’s opinion, truly matter.

The arts are neglected because they are based on perception, and perception is disdained because it is not assumed to involve thought. In fact, educators and administrators cannot justify giving the arts an important position in the curriculum unless they understand that the arts are the most powerful means of strengthening the perceptual component without which productive thinking is impossible in any field of endeavor.

The question is not whether Amherst students have received their “desirable supplement”: whether they have some experience in playing the piano, have been taught linear perspective, acted in a school play or participated in a dance ensemble. Whatever time has been spent on their education in the practice of the arts will be minuscule in comparison to their training in reading, writing and quantitative skills. More important, their arts education will not have been integrated with those “basics.” All knowledge first comes to us through our senses, and until we have acquired the skill of concentrated sensory perception, our ability to understand the world is incomplete. A lack of primary and secondary education in the practice of the arts, no less than insufficient preparation in writing and quantitative skills, limits our students’ ability to take complete advantage of their education and fully develop their intellect.

Artistic work is a unique manner of shaping experience, where both intellect and instinct are brought fully to bear, not in proving a scientific hypothesis, but in achieving an integrative understanding which frequently emphasizes contradiction and paradox. Education in the practice of the arts develops the ability to synthesize opposite approaches: the analytical with the intuitive, the structured with the improvised, and the abstract with the empirical. In colleges like Amherst, the study of the arts can reinforce the fundamentals of a liberal arts education by nurturing distinct modes of knowing through both scholarship and artistic practice.

As teachers of the arts at Amherst, we embrace the principles of openness, inclusiveness, and aspiration to push beyond existing limitations. Unlike the conservatory, our courses are open to all students, given successful completion of any pre-requisites. We consider intelligence, intellectual curiosity, imagination and a strong work ethic the essential attributes
necessary for full engagement in our disciplines. As a result, Amherst has fostered a significant number of successful architects, artists, art historians, choreographers, composers, designers, directors, museum professionals, musicologists, performers, and playwrights, who may never have considered such careers before coming here.

The power of a liberal arts education comes from the ability to understand and explore the world from a variety of perspectives. The structuring of rigorous, integrated programs in the practice of the arts along with the traditional scholarly disciplines presents particular pedagogical and administrative challenges for liberal arts colleges, and we believe that Amherst must take a leadership role in meeting those challenges.

The Departments of Fine Arts, Music, and Theater and Dance include both scholars and artists, sometimes within the same person. Together, we present the life of the arts across history and cultures; we combine foundational technical studies with the study of theory; we invite our students to experience both thoughtful awareness and serious participation, allowing them to engage and refine their intellectual, intuitive, physical and creative selves.

Scholarship in the history and theory of the arts has a strong tradition at Amherst College. This involves not only faculty-scholars in the three departments in the arts, but also faculty in a wide range of other departments who address the arts through the perspective of their own disciplines: the 2005-2006 Amherst College Catalog lists 106 courses, taught by 52 members of the non-arts faculty from 18 departments, that include aspects of the performing or visual arts as part of their course descriptions. This is in addition to the 53 courses in the history and theory of the visual and performing arts taught by 17 faculty members in our three departments.

Clearly, a large number of non-arts faculty integrate the history and theory of the visual, spatial and performing arts into their teaching and scholarship. But Amherst suffers from an historic lack of support for teaching in the practice of those arts. Even though conditions have improved marginally over the last twenty years, as of the second semester of this year, there will be only 6 FTE tenure-track artist-faculty among Amherst’s 165 FTE’s (3.64%). Another 8 artist-faculty are non-tenure-track and/or visiting artists, most teaching part-time on short-term contracts. All artist-faculty, even those tenured and on tenure track, spend almost all of their teaching time in the introductory courses where most Amherst students must begin. These courses, which require small class sizes, are historically over-enrolled, sometimes even necessitating uncompensated extra sections. Because of their under-representation on the faculty, instructors in the practice of the arts have had to teach large numbers of Special Topics classes, not to meet a special interest of a student, but rather to provide the pedagogical continuity of offering second and third level courses in their respective departments. The Registrar has prepared a list of all of the Special Topics courses taught, by department, over the last five years: During this period the Department of Fine Arts taught 90 Special Topics courses, 72 of which were in the practice of the arts and were distributed over 5-1/4 studio teaching positions. The Department of Music, with a faculty of 8, gave 90 Special Topics courses (60 in practice) and the department of Theater and Dance, also with a faculty of 8, gave 57 Special Topics courses (50 in practice). The median number of Special Topics courses given in the 27
departments of the college over the last five years was 19. Because of these heavy departmental teaching demands, artist-faculty have very limited opportunities to co-teach across departments or even within their own departments, to teach first-year seminars, or otherwise engage a wider student population in the practice of their art. Part-time and visiting faculty-artists are even more isolated from the broader life of the college. If they serve on college committees or attend faculty meetings, it is on a voluntary, uncompensated basis.

This imbalance in faculty resources between scholarship in the arts and the practice of the arts needs to be redressed to allow artist-faculty access to teaching across the curriculum, in order to integrate their particular way of knowing into a broad range of courses and the community of the College. The great majority of our students arrive at Amherst bereft of preparation in the practice of the arts, and because of fear, lack of encouragement, or difficulty in gaining admission to limited-enrollment courses, many never have the opportunity to develop their artistic capacities. The positive news is that a good many Amherst College students are already managing to integrate their educational experiences in the arts with other disciplines. The College needs to catch up to our best students and assume leadership in shaping a fuller educational experience which gives the visual and performing arts proper emphasis within the liberal arts.

Faculty-artists should be encouraged and enabled to collaborate with each other as well as with faculty-scholars. The nature of the visual and performing arts has changed dramatically since these three departments were founded. Text, sound, light, space, dance, music, and both moving and still images are now often combined to form a new palette for the artist's use. The college should make resources available to allow the current faculty of the various arts departments to collaborate in creating courses which will explore the application of these new artistic elements. New resources are needed to support these new technologies, and to hire additional FTE's whose expertise is in these collaborative art forms.

The single most important action that the college could take for the advancement of the arts at Amherst would be to place a high priority on creating more FTE positions in the practice of the arts to redress the historical neglect of the college. Currently we are relying unfairly upon the dedication of de-facto "second tier" colleagues to provide courses which are central to our curriculum in the practice of the arts. It is essential that these colleagues, the great majority of whom labor under year to year contracts, have the opportunity to become regular members of the faculty for the purpose of long-term planning and innovation in our curriculum, not to mention simple equity. In addition, the departments of the arts will propose to the CEP requests for new FTE faculty positions with the quid-pro-quo being that the three departments would create and teach courses in a wide range of high priority fields of interdisciplinary study. It is not surprising that with so few artists on the faculty, there is only one interdisciplinary course listed in the 2005-06 Amherst College Catalog co-taught by an artist and a scholar.

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Our committee will continue to meet to explore a wide range of ideas designed to enhance the study of the arts at Amherst, including the formation of a standing committee on the arts, course contributions to a broadly based Film and Video Studies program, visiting artists' contributions to classes in disciplines outside of the arts, intensive inter-term workshops in the arts, cross-disciplinary courses and symposia within the three departments, to name a few initiatives currently under discussion. We look forward to receiving additional ideas from the Amherst Faculty on how we can participate more fully in the curriculum of the College.

Respectfully submitted,

The Working Group on The Arts at Amherst (Listed alphabetically)

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Notes

1. This information has been verified by the Registrar. No courses in the departments of Fine Arts, Music, and Theater and Dance, or Creative Writing are included, nor are any courses which are taught or co-taught with a faculty member from the departments of the arts or creative writing; for example, Black Studies 43, taught by Professor Abiodun, who has a joint appointment in Fine Arts and Black Studies, or First Year Seminar 13, which is taught by Professor Zajac from Physics and Professor Upton from Fine Arts. All courses are only counted once; for example, English 15 is the same course as Black Studies 54.

2. This information comes from the Chairs of the departments of Fine Arts, Music and Theater and Dance. Because the Department of Theater and Dance is comprised entirely of artists, 4 of their faculty contribute courses to the curriculum in the history and theory of their disciplines.

3. This information comes from the Chairs of the departments of Fine Arts, Music and Theater and Dance and the Dean of the Faculty.

4. While the evidence is anecdotal, gathered through our contacts with current and former students, it is also sizable. We plan on asking Institutional Research to conduct surveys which will produce empirical data which will help us measure and better understand this phenomenon.

5. Theater and Dance 21/Russian 30: This course will no longer be given when Connie Congdon reduces her teaching load next year. This information has been verified by the Registrar.