

Innovative Deeds for Engagement and Excellence

Inaugural address by Jacqueline Chanda, Ph.D.
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Good morning! I would like to begin these remarks with thanks. I want to thank the trustees of the Kansas City Art Institute for entrusting to me the responsibility of leading this wonderful institution into the future. I also want to thank the staff members who worked so very hard to make this day possible. And finally I want to thank any and all friends and colleagues from the Kansas City community for taking the time to come to this momentous occasion.

It was with great enthusiasm that I accepted the offer to become the 23rd president of the Kansas City Art Institute in February of this year. The prospect of being the leader of such a fine institution whose programming is helping shape the next generation of creative problem solvers was exhilarating. I feel as if I have prepared my whole life for this undertaking. The Kansas City Art Institute from its humble beginnings as a Sketch Club in the 1800s has become, to quote Milton Katz a “significant cultural force in the Kansas City community and the nation.” I am proud to be a part of a school that has spawned such great artists as Robert Rauschenberg and Robert Morris, artists I used to teach about when I was a professor at the Ohio State University. And I felt destined to come to KCAI when I learned from Milton’s book that the Kansas City Art Association and School of Design, which became the Kansas City Art Institute, was incorporated on July 18 — the same date as my birthday.

The growth and success of the institution can only be attributed to strong leadership and dedicated faculty and staff. During the institution’s 126 years of existence, there have been many changes initiated by my predecessors who believed so strongly in the value of the visual arts. They had the foresight and wherewithal to bring the institution through good and difficult times, increase enrollment over time, make important capital improvements, and create financial stability. By their efforts enrollment has gone from modest beginning of 12 members of a sketch club to a four-year art and design college with a current enrollment of 770 students.

One of the most striking elements of the Kansas City Art Institute, which seems like no other undergraduate art school, is the emphasis on the intimate relationships that are forged between students and faculty starting from the freshman to the senior year. This is truly the cornerstone of this institution and of a good visual arts education. Another important distinction is the integration of liberal arts into the art and design curriculum beginning virtually on Day 1 of a student’s career at KCAI. These experiences are very much unlike my own, where during my senior year in a painting class a professor who never had much to say to me called two other professors from adjoining studios to come and see my work. Pleased by this rare and unexpected attention, I heard him tell his colleagues, “I finally have an artist! Look, she is painting in the manner of Manet.” I was elated at having been singled out for what clearly was intended as great praise, but as I beamed with joy, I thought to myself, “who the heck is Manet?” ... and immediately after class, I went to the library to find out. I

had never made the connections between my required art history classes and my studio practice.

It seems unlikely that this would transpire at KCAI, because liberal arts content is intricately woven into the fabric of the studio practice. In short, at KCAI students get a comprehensive visual arts and design education that includes a strong liberal arts component. Based on past achievements, accomplished alumni and a bright future, KCAI is poised and uniquely positioned to become the premier art and design college in the Midwest and one of the top art colleges of the nation, positioned to make a stronger footprint in the international arena.

Some would say that our geographic location is not ideal for attaining such a vision, but I beg to differ. I feel we need to embrace our geographic location. Instead of bemoaning our lack of mountains or oceans we should embrace our central location in a beautiful region where two rivers replace the ocean and rolling hills replace the mountains. Kansas City is a vibrant city with much to offer. We have more fountains than any city in the world outside of Rome. But what is most advantageous is that we are near the geographic center of the United States. In short, we are at the nation's crossroads. If we are to help advance Kansas City and Missouri as the nation's "creative crossroads," an aspiration expressed by the Arts Council of Metropolitan Kansas City, it is the responsibility of KCAI to be a major player in this pursuit, a pursuit that can facilitate our being the premier art and design college of the Midwest.

Being the premier art and design college means having "une IDEE," a French expression that means an idea. But the acronym I-D-E-E really refers to KCAI being a place of Innovative Deeds for Engagement and Excellence.

Innovation

Innovation means to be or do something new and different, to introduce new methods, customs, devices, etc. It comes through experimentation, exploration, risk taking and seeing new possibilities from existing realities. But isn't this what artists do already? How do we move that experimentation, exploration and risk-taking to the next level? Some of it may mean moving out of our comfort zone or elevating what we already do well to the next level. It means asking ourselves the question WHAT IF WE COULD and figuring out how to get there.

In my own career I have been challenged to be innovative. Having worked at two Tier One academic research institutions, I am accustomed to hearing this question asked by scientists. As artists we could ask this question too. For example WHAT IF WE COULD create an art product that could be patented? What would it be?

As an assistant professor at The Ohio State University in the mid 1990s, I asked myself WHAT IF I COULD create a teaching and learning tool that would enable children to study a work of art as an art historian. I ventured out from my comfort zone into technology at a time when it was not a popular thing to use technology for teaching, learning or research. Mine was not the simple use of a course management system, such as WebCT or Blackboard but the creation of an interactive CD-ROM at a point when interactive CD-ROMs were rare.

Working with a graduate student who was a sculptor studying computer science we developed from a 2-D image a 3-D image that could be rotated and seen from all sides. We dared to be innovative.

To be the premier art and design college in the Midwest, we must continually innovate.

Engagement

Engagement means being engaged, having something that occupies the attention or efforts of an individual, something that attracts and holds fast one's attention and interest. As you can see, engagement can have a double meaning: being engaged in doing something oneself and also getting others to be involved. KCAI has excelled at getting students out of the studio and into the community. What better way of engaging others and being engaged!

But WHAT IF WE COULD become agents of change and use art as a life-changing experience, to uplift and transform? Engagement when pursued as a learning opportunity helps one make connections, see possibilities, be involved, reflect, ask questions and develop understanding. For example, when you engage in the study of a work of art, you can see and understand all kinds of relationships: social, political, cultural, economic and more. The work of art all of a sudden takes on a life of its own as it becomes the voice of the artist, the message of a community, the story of a culture, the expression of a society. We all know that this is true because we know and understand that nothing is born out of a vacuum and that ideas spring from a variety of sources: regional, national, and global contexts. Engagement stands for being involved in and with the community of artists and with the broader society on a regional, national and global scale.

Often engagement takes the form of partnerships and collaborations with businesses, other educational institutions, art museums and galleries in which there is a sharing of ideas, a give and take allowing all parties to walk away with something positive. WHAT IF WE COULD create partnerships that transform the notion of the contributions that an education in visual arts and design can make? Imagine a situation where engineering firms and scientists sought out artists to complete their teams of thinkers.

I have seen what the visual arts can do when a community is involved with art, the aim of which is to engage social change. In Columbus, Ohio, art transformed a community when a neighborhood art educator and activist worked with local artists and the university to reclaim a plot of land that had been overtaken by drug dealers and turned it into a playground that integrated the transformative power of artwork into the design. The project helped a community connect with its heritage and sparked a stronger relationship with the local museum through an art exhibition organized by a colleague and me. We engaged the local community and were engaged in social change.

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Excellence

I've touched on innovation and engagement, complete with their component of partnerships and exploration, and I turn now to excellence, the final ingredient in this "IDEE."

Excellence means to excel, to surpass others or be greater than or superior in some respect or area. It means having outstanding features and qualities. But what does it really mean? Excellence is an in-the-moment concept that changes with time. Seth Godin, an American entrepreneur, author and public speaker, says, "To be excellent means you must be an artist." He further states that excellence is "to be artistic: to make a connection with the customer and to somehow change them for the better."

As an educational institution we can only achieve excellence if we reach our full potential, but even then we must continue to recruit quality faculty and build better facilities; identify superior ways of delivering instruction and assessing learning; and develop new capacities to prepare students for life-long learning and social responsibility. Our faculty are exceptional and accomplished, our facilities are better than most and our students are stellar. But, together, all of us can aspire to greater achievement and accomplishments.

It is most important that our students, faculty and staff embrace life-long learning, problem-solving and the continual development of skill sets that allow them to meet the challenges of the future. To stagnate is to remain in the past. This means we must be prepared to embrace an environment of excellence that pushes boundaries and encourages students, faculty and staff to reach their full potential by being the best that they can be. WHAT IF WE COULD, as an educational institution, rise up and take hold of new opportunities, new ways of thinking, seeing, doing and understanding to continually be excellent?

My travel experiences abroad as an exchange student at the University of Bordeaux, as a graduate student at the Sorbonne University and as an expatriate worker in Zambia and in France instilled in me the thirst for knowledge and a spirit of risk-taking. When going to France to pursue my graduate studies, I took a risk and left the U.S. with a round-trip ticket, just in case I had to return within the first year, and \$150 in my pocket, but more so with a determined will to make it work. I was not quite sure how it would go or what I would do other than attend the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux Arts, at the time the most prestigious arts college in France. After a year at the art school, I decided I needed something different and moved over to the Sorbonne, where seven years later I completed the equivalent of a Ph.D. These experiences changed me for the better and helped me understand that to be excellent also required practice. So as a student of a foreign language I practiced hard to perfect the use of the French language, and as a novice bike rider, I practiced hard in my bike-riding group to become better and faster than when I started. I was striving to be excellent.

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In conclusion

While I have separated these three words — innovation, engagement and excellence — making it seem as if they stand alone, they are all interconnected. Innovation begets

excellence (for one is seeking what to do to make things better); excellence requires engagement (because being good or excellent doesn't happen in a vacuum); and engagement leads to innovation. In summary, to be the premier art and design college in the Midwest, we must continually innovate, engage and excel.

Together we can raise the bar. We can work together with students, staff, faculty and the board to build on the legacy of this fine institution.

In conclusion, I need for you to remember that the field of art and design is changing. The ways of delivering education are changing. How do we become the most significant and influential art and design institution in the Midwest? We can get there through "une IDÉE": Innovative Deeds for Engagement and Excellence. I ask you to join me in redefining or reframing what innovation, engagement and excellence mean for KCAI, in making it not just one among many colleges of art and design but in helping to make it the premier college of art and design in the Midwest and beyond.