

FCCCC President's Address
CCC Board of Trustee's Meeting
Thursday, September 1st, 2011

Chairman Cabrera, Chancellor Hyman, members of the Board, Officers of the District, faculty, staff and all others present, good afternoon.

Because this is the traditional beginning of the new school year, I would like to argue a big idea in this address to the Board and focus on the meaning of community and some implications for our colleges.

For some historical context, let me first talk about the subject of my National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Seminar, the Black Mountain College experience. Begun in 1933 as a pedagogical experiment in educational community (as Martin Duberman describes it in *Black Mountain, An Exploration in Community*, 1972), the school lasted only 23 years, but its influence continues today.

Its faculty included Josef and Anni Albers, refugees from Nazi Germany and former instructors at the Bauhaus; John Cage, the avant-garde musician and performance artist, who, upon seeing one of Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings at one of the early happenings, had the courage to write "4'33'", which radically questions our ideas about what music is and isn't; Charles Olson, whose influence stretched to the San Francisco Renaissance poets and Allen Ginsberg; and Buckminster Fuller, whose work on the geodesic dome reached fruition at Black Mountain College. In fact, both Fuller and Cage went on briefly to the New Bauhaus, which morphed into the Institute of Design, later folded into the Illinois Institute of Technology (a school I think we've heard of).

Students associated with Black Mountain include the painter, Robert Rauschenberg who, with Billy Kluver, established E.A.T. (Experiments in Art and Technology), which promoted collaborations between artists and engineers; Robert de Niro senior, who was a painter and part of the New York art scene; Arthur Penn, the director of such films as *Bonnie and Clyde*; the poet Robert Creeley; the artist Ruth Asawa for whom the San Francisco School of the Arts was later renamed; and the writer of *Midnight Cowboy*, James Leo Herlihy. And the list of successful and

creative individuals goes on and on and on, a remarkable list, particularly for a very small, rural liberal arts college in the mountains of North Carolina.

What is most remarkable, however, is not just what these individuals did after Black Mountain, but also how the community transformed them and, in turn, they the community. Most of the faculty and students arrived at Black Mountain College extraordinary only in that they were nontraditional in some sense and would not have done well at any other institution. The founder of the college, John Andrew Rice, had been pushed out of Rollins College for his radical ideas about teaching and learning. Josef Albers was relatively famous in Germany when he arrived, but he didn't speak much English; and Rice still hired him. Anni Albers did speak English and, in the slightly more egalitarian world of Black Mountain, her work blossomed and she became as influential as her husband. Rauschenberg and Cage were freckled-faced kids when they arrived; they left as mature artists. Fuller had already twice been expelled from Harvard, gained and lost a fortune, and designed numerous prototypes (and realities) that had not been particularly successful. And let's be clear: Anytime we talk about sustainability, ecosystems, synergy, and Spaceship Earth, we are speaking Buckminster Fuller language and reflecting ideas that Bucky originated.

Black Mountain became a place of intellectual tolerance and diversity. Long before Little Rock, for instance, and after much discussion among the faculty, staff, and students, the college integrated its community, first by inviting the artist Jacob Lawrence to teach and then by accepting racially diverse students. Michael Rumaker writes movingly about coming out as a gay student, again long before New York's Stonewall riots changed our nation's attitude toward sexual orientation. (*Black Mountain Days*, 2003) On the other hand, although Anni Albers and M.C. Richards were strong and influential faculty leaders, Black Mountain, when it closed, still privileged male over female and marginalized many of its women.

Something in this community was the crucible for immense creativity and knowledge creation. This "something," I suggest, was place and proximity: Students and faculty came to Black Mountain because it promised a place for nontraditional individuals who thought creatively, outliers in both thought and behavior; and it allowed the proximity for formal and informal exchange of ideas which led to visionary thinking.

More recently, Richard Florida has argued, in his four hundred page book, *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2003), that economic growth and stability depends also on human creativity and the idea of place to sustain it. Florida claims, for instance, that “Powering the great ongoing changes of our time is the rise of human creativity as the defining feature of economic life. Creativity has come to be valued – and systems have evolved to encourage and harness it – because new technologies, new industries, new wealth and all other *good economic things flow from it*” (my italics, Florida, p. 21). He is responding in part to sociologists such as Robert Putnam who, in *Bowling Alone* (2001), posits the erosion of some communities, bowling leagues and Rotary Clubs, for example, in modern America.

A keystone of Florida’s argument is the importance of what he calls *creative communities* and their ability to attract creative people. He argues that economic development depends on a community that values technology, talent and tolerance, what he calls “the three T’s of economic development,” and that the 3T’s cluster in particular places, his creative communities, which are as vibrant and alive as the 1950s bowling alleys. And where is this paradigmatic creative community, the place where the proximity of technology, talent and tolerance produces creative ideas? The university community, such as Palo Alto, California, which has Stanford and Berkeley and Google and Silicon Valley, and the Research Triangle around Duke and University of North Carolina. (Florida, pp. 249 – 266)

But Florida cautions that “the potential of the university as an engine for regional economic development has captured the fancy of business leaders, policy makers and academics – and it has led them astray. A theory of sorts has been handed down that assumes a linear pathway from university research to commercial innovation to an ever-expanding network of newly formed companies. This is a naïve and mechanistic view of the university’s contribution to economic development. . . . To be an effective contributor to regional growth, the university must play three interrelated role that reflect the 3T’s of creative places,” namely, the university needs to be a center for new technologies, needs to attract and encourage creative thinkers, and needs to tolerate non-normative behaviors and ideas (p. 292). What I’ve presented above as proximity and place as a crucible for innovations.

There are some problems with Florida's argument. For instance, an aggregate of talented individuals does not necessarily mean tolerance and does not necessarily produce creativity; and his marker for diversity, diversity not determined by racial integration but diversity in terms of sexual orientation, is problematic for a number of reasons. Moreover, his view of creative communities romanticizes and overlooks some of the tensions in these communities. As anyone who enjoys latte in Wicker Park will attest, the hipster is as marked in his uniform as the 1950s gray suited organizational man. Nevertheless, Florida's main point, that a transformative power of place produces creative change, is important.

Why is Florida's research important for the City Colleges of Chicago? Why should we care about a small residential college in rural North Carolina?

Let's take one issue: students simultaneously enrolled in multiple colleges. The City Colleges of Chicago encompasses seven, independently accredited institutions, that attract commuting students. Most of our students commute to one primary college; the numbers who don't vary from the least, -- 4.2% of Wright's students enrolled in multiple colleges, -- to the most, -- 9.5% of Kennedy-King's students (according to the Office of Research and Evaluation published June 8, 2011).

What do these numbers mean? Are students taking courses across colleges because they are enrolled in online courses at various colleges? They don't need to travel to different places for their classes; they need a more flexible PeopleSoft portal to report correctly their home college affiliation. Are these students in special programs such as the CCC-DePaul Adult Bridge Program who spend half their semester at Wright or Truman College and then at DePaul University? We already accommodate those students with particularized schedules to support their working lives. Or are these students who cannot complete their program requirements unless they move between colleges, as the shuttle bus initiative assumes?

Let's say that these numbers do reflect student who cannot get the courses they need to complete their degree or program at their home institutions. We want completion (whatever that means, another topic for another address) and we don't want to leave students stranded on Cottage Grove. But let's not overlook the fundamental issues that hide in the numbers and ignore

the insights from Florida's research and the experiences at Black Mountain College that suggest alternative solutions.

It is not the lack of transportation opportunities that drive these numbers. Rather, it is incomplete communities: curriculum that needs diversifying; class size that needs to be reduced; faculty and staff who need support; and students who need local access to complete programs and local access to a diversity of courses and people. As I've argued above, success, whether it is student success, institutional excellence, or economic growth, success depends on place and proximity and the construction of human capital that creative communities engender. Proximity and place: their transformative power is something we need to consider when policy issues arise.

Let's be visionary and not reactionary in our policy decisions. The visionary solution would not fragment the colleges and divide the programs, but strengthen each college community by encouraging both arts and sciences at each college, by expanding our definition of diversity to include curriculum as well as personnel, and by promoting social connections within the community's boundaries. We need, therefore, to examine curriculum and programs at each college; we need to think about each college in its community setting and how best to encourage that creative synergy between college and community, and among the diverse faculty, staff and students. Black Mountain became this phenomenal college because people came to the college *and* worked together, talked together, ate together. We *make* human capital; we *make* community; we *construct* creative communities. Every time we see an instructor with students following him like Karl Lorenz's ducks, that's community, that's retention, that's success. You don't see that on a shuttle bus.

I will revisit this issue of community at our colleges in a later address, but I'd like to close with praise for the work being done by Academic Affairs, and in particular, Kojo Quartey and Mike Davis. Faculty Council in conjunction with Academic Affairs had our annual retreat in August. That community of faculty and administrators (including the new Inspector General) produced some very creative and productive ideas for the coming year. It was the best retreat in which I've participated, and it bodes well for future collaborations among us.

Respectfully submitted,

Polly Hoover, President of FC4