

The Future of the Fine Arts in Higher Education

This month, we welcomed Dr. Margaret Merrion, Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Western Michigan University, to discuss issues related to the area of fine arts and her thoughts on the future of this culturally important area to higher education and our communities. Budget issues, curriculum relevancy, the connection of K-12 arts education and higher education, employment statistics and the highlights of working in this field are all discussed in this month's interview.

After reading, we invite you to continue the discussion in our [LinkedIn](#) group or follow HigherEd Careers on [Twitter](#).

Andrew Hibel, HigherEdJobs: Dr. Merrion, you are the Dean of the College of Fine Arts at Western Michigan University (WMU). From your biography, I've noticed that you have roots in music education spanning elementary, middle and high school. Please tell us briefly about your background and also how you transitioned into the area of higher education?

Dr. Margaret Merrion, Western Michigan University: After undergraduate work, I began teaching in Chicago and thought I would be a high school music educator the rest of my career. My husband's job required a move, so I returned to graduate school at the University of Missouri. As a teaching assistant, I enjoyed the sphere of influence I had affecting future teachers (and generations of students they would influence). I then decided to pursue a career path in higher education. It was a smooth transition, because my first post was in a laboratory school in which I modeled music teaching (K-8), supervised clinical experiences, and conducted research. After a few years, I migrated to a position as undergraduate and graduate coordinator in the School of Music at the University of Northern Iowa. These experiences gave me a taste of administration and whet my appetite for full-time work as a dean. While I experienced "withdrawal" from teaching as I moved to administrative ranks, to help in the transition I had positive reinforcement from women leaders, my mentor and the many constituents I served.

Hibel: In 2009, you authored an article, "The Prophecy for the Arts in Higher Education,"¹ discussing predictions on how arts education will change over the next decade. What were the major issues, either positive or negative, that were defined?

Merrion: The Delphi study identified eight distinct areas subject to change in the future -- although they all seemed to affect one another. The major findings pointed to a more relevant curriculum that prepared students to be "job ready" in different ways. For example, curricular content will include more world music in the future, making graduates more conversant with indigenous, as well as traditional, art making. Technology will heavily impact the curriculum in both substance and delivery of content. Interdisciplinarity will permeate the rigid walls of our disciplines, allowing for more multi genre performances. The experts also predicted a greater role for the arts in the creative economy, suggesting more entrepreneurial content for career development. This will necessitate more practical experience in arts organizations and a new breed of faculty to make this all happen. Faculty will bring new pedagogical approaches and career expectations for themselves. They will be keenly facile in adapting pedagogy to individual needs, teach with an economy of contact, and use global perspectives while maintaining community interests in their professional work. They will seek appointments in departments that have potential collaborators -- far more interested in interdisciplinary pursuits. The hot fields of animation, multimedia, digital and e-art will continue to be in demand. Students will be interested in more than one discipline. Learning will take place "in the air" and "on the ground" with local and global partners. Organizations in the community will become active partners in the training programs, and institutions across the globe will network to pool expertise for research, master classes, guest lectures, etc. We will see a greater diversity among the student body, too.

Hibel: Of course hindsight is 20/20, but since it is now 2011, would you forecast any other different issues from what was originally discussed in 2009?

Merrion: In discussing these findings with deans across the nation and with faculty pursuing formal strategic planning in Connecticut, Florida and Michigan, two issues surfaced. Both would require expanding panels of expertise. First, I wish we had

focused on the pipeline of students. What changes will we see in the incoming arts students? How will this digital generation approach learning traditional content (ballet, cello, printmaking or acting) and content yet to be imagined? Will K-12 education provide a different foundation for their entry into college? How will social media connect and isolate this generation in their disposition toward individual and ensemble learning? Will these students know or be able to do different things than previous generations?

The second issue is the projected needs of various industries and their role in shaping the arts-related job market. For example, a panel of futurists could inform this study with insights from various institutions such as health, entertainment, manufacturing, mass media, etc. I wonder if Ford Motor Company's design needs can be anticipated and expressed in meaningful ways to inform preparation programs. For example, do they find the best innovation occurring in teams populated by artists and engineers or among designers who have engineering skills? There are implications for double majors. Or, as we create curricula for new medical schools, is there a need for the healing arts as expressed through the medical humanities? What roles does arts training have in the professions of medicine and health care? I just returned from China and learned that prisoners are being educated in "red party" through learning national songs and literature. Perennially the arts have been employed for propaganda purposes, however, the serious attention to their role in brain development continues to suggest neo-natal through geriatric opportunities for art-related careers. As we unravel the complexity of the brain, perhaps scientists can predict new professions for the arts to advance brain development with respect to spatial learning, pattern recognition, audiation, kinesthetic memory and other skills.

Hibel: How closely, if at all, are the affairs of K-12 fine arts education tied to fine arts at the collegiate level?

Merrion: The answer to this question varies widely, depending on where you are nationally. We recently hosted Scott Shuler on our campus. He is president of the Music Educators National Conference (50,000 music teachers in the USA). Some of the issues he highlighted were remote concerns of tertiary arts education; others were in alignment with our campus concerns. K-12 music education appears to be preoccupied with establishing a firm place for music among core content, recognized by the Department of Education. Higher education would certainly support that agenda, however, that is not its greatest concern. Together they agree learning outcomes must be established for arts curricula, but there is less agreement on the specific content throughout the various disciplines. Both are concerned about the future of arts specialists in K-12 education, but there are divided opinions as to what constitutes the best training program for those teachers. I have not observed much solidarity between K-12 and collegiate arts education, and, as a result, we have a weak political and strategic agenda for the future of the arts at our respective educational levels.

Hibel: Referring to a recent post on the Western States Art Federation website, many states are trying to make the case for the value of the arts to their state's economy, education and civic life.² Do you see funding for the arts in higher education to be an issue?

Merrion: The funding reality is sobering; yet the future can be brighter -- albeit much different -- than the present model. Funding for the arts in higher education was cited as a serious threat to college access and quality among the experts in the Delphi research. Student debt load is going to get worse, especially if we continue to rely on tuition and state revenues. Recent findings from the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP) indicated that about one-third of arts alumni abandon their artistic ambitions due to debt burdens. This will have a direct and negative impact on educational pursuits. On the other hand, the Delphi study experts forecasted that the arts will have a more visible role in a creative economy, and I think the resource base can be assisted through that expanded presence. It will take collaboration and partnerships to demonstrate that role convincingly. For example, in Kalamazoo (pop. 150,000), we have six theatres producing live performances that enhance restaurant, hotel and downtown shopping commerce. The International Animation Festival and Gilmore International Keyboard Festival draw wide audiences who use our airports, rent cars, fill their tanks with fuel, and buy Michigan products. The university and community arts vie for the community's support and attendance at our events. Rather than compete, the resource solutions are found in collaboration: university and community partnerships that rest on joint investment and mutual benefits. Donors appreciate that cooperative model and invest accordingly.

Hibel: On your WMU College of Fine Arts website,³ you have an impressive strategic map for creating a college of distinction. How did you use your staff and faculty in creating this, and why did you think this was an important plan to create?

Merrion: We have abundant creative capital at Western Michigan University. I tapped that talent to shape our strategic map collectively. I conducted "listening tours" by inviting every employee and meeting with them in small groups. I did the same with stakeholders outside of the College of Fine Arts. These included faculty, alumni, students, staff, community arts leaders, department leadership, donors, and my superiors. I planted seeds -- goals I wished to attain, too. I made sure all groups were multi-disciplinary so that diverse thinking would be fostered. We focused our discussion around three questions: What are our unmistakable

strengths? (Things we can't walk away from.) What do we need to shore up? (Things we must improve to remain distinctive and competitive.) What three opportunities should we pursue, given fiscal realities? (Big ideas for the short-term future.) It was a great deal of fun to cross-check ideas of students and alumni with faculty and leadership. There was amazing consensus over the big ideas, and the process helped align our priorities. The strategic map assured my superiors and funders that we have a sound business plan for the future -- worthy of their support.

Hibel: Talking again about the strategic plan referenced previously, one of the major goals is to "Engage students continuously in relevant curriculum." How do you make sure that your students are receiving the most relevant curriculum and how does this help them upon graduation?

Merrion: We are ultra sensitive to curricular relevancy and assess it in a variety of ways. We ensure that the curriculum is relevant by examining program outcomes -- placement of graduates and alumni satisfaction surveys. Visiting artists and professionals provide another read on relevancy, as they bring current industry standards to the forefront in their meetings with students and faculty. Their unvarnished, practical and insightful perspectives "tell it like it is," making career preparation relevant.

We also remain relevant through vibrant partnerships with organizations that immerse our students into the profession through systematic experiences off site. For example, we have a partnership with Chicago Shakespeare Theatre that engages students each semester in workshops, shadowing activities, meetings and behind-the-scene experiences. The students are literally learning the ropes.

Finally, we are exploring a new initiative called "Artist as Citizen." Our students bring their talent to local organizations and serve their needs in exchange for learning about the community and the non-profit world. Since all artists will ultimately reside in a community, we think this is relevant preparation for the life and role of the artist in society. All three of these strategies help keep the curriculum relevant, and they also provide excellent networking opportunities for our students as they launch their careers. What could be more relevant than that?

Hibel: I'm not sure what could be more relevant than that! Employability of graduates is obviously a major goal of academic programs. In a recent journal abstract, it stated, "For vocational subjects and degrees for which clear links to industry may be envisaged (such as IT, Business, Technology and Science) the challenge is surmountable. However, it remains for non-vocational subjects, and especially degree programmes in the Arts and Humanities, to prove their merit in this demand-based climate." It goes on to say that some skeptics may worry that efforts to adapt an academic discipline to the needs of economic utility may effectively dilute the academic content of a degree program. What are your thoughts on the idea of adapting programs in the fine arts to meet utility? ⁴ Does this occur?

Merrion: My research findings echo the skeptics' concerns, yet I personally don't think the dilution danger is great. And I don't apologize for preparing students for career success -- it is a measurable outcome of program quality. Gone are the days when faculty designed curricula in a vacuum with little regard for measureable results. Preparing arts professionals involves clear outcomes and accountability. Meeting the needs of economic utility does not take away from maintaining substance and rigor in the curriculum. It adds to it. The research affirmed that future curricula will continue to proffer deep specialization in the art forms, but it also indicated programs must incorporate more entrepreneurial content, i.e., greater breadth. Students are already seeking these opportunities within existing structures -- whether they take a business minor or a double major. Students are interested in fashioning careers creatively and recognize they need more than one-dimensional arts training. Whether we in academia like it or not, the students are moving in this direction. I am optimistic that with an enriched and more entrepreneurial curriculum our academic programs will produce more successful graduates.

Hibel: As the HigherEdJobs Higher Education Employment Report states, ⁵ job postings in the fine and applied arts have been on the rise since 2009. Specifically, there was a 7.1 percent increase in the first quarter of 2011 compared to the first quarter of 2010. What do you think are some reasons behind this increase?

Merrion: Our faculty were skittish about retiring in 2008-9. Once the stock market settled and faculty were more confident about pension portfolios, we experienced a wave of retirements in 2010. A second factor was the instability of university budgets. Administrators held off on hiring to help manage budget rescissions in 2008-2010. Meanwhile, enrollments are growing, and hiring is necessary to meet programmatic demands. I think this accounts for some of the increase. I'm not sure, however, how much of our experience in Michigan can be generalized nationally.

Hibel: From what we have heard on a story by story basis, it really does seem to vary state by state for the public schools. Again referring to the Q1 HigherEdJobs Employment Report, it states, "Within fine and applied arts, demand for faculty from different

disciplines appears to have shifted over time." Have you seen a change at your university or in the area of arts in higher education as a whole in regards to the faculty demand for different disciplines? If so, why do think this is occurring? If not, do you think this will change in the near future?

Merrion: So far, I haven't seen a significant shift. If the Delphi study experts are on point, we won't see much of a shift other than continued strength in digital media faculty. What I do see shifting is that some states will begin to relegate the study of arts to a limited number of institutions. For example, in Nevada this year, dance and theatre programs were closed at the University of Nevada-Reno campus. In states such as Michigan (which has 15 state universities in the system), I think the high costs of arts programs will cause some campuses to manage the portfolio of programs accordingly. This is common practice in other high-cost professional programs such as law, medicine, and architecture. Such consolidation may mean overall fewer jobs in fine and applied arts over the decade.

Hibel: Do you have any other general thoughts on the findings from the Fine and Applied Arts Supplement from the HigherEdJobs Quarterly Employment Report?

Merrion: The growth of digital arts (by a factor of almost 10) is consistent with the research predictions. The shrinking percentage of graphic design (from Q1 2007 to Q1 2011), however, is curious. We have added faculty with digital expertise, and our graphic design program has evolved to include substantive digital art skills -- still holding its market share with the number of faculty positions.

Hibel: In every interview, we like to close with a few questions related to careers in higher education. Thinking of your own career, what do you like most about working in the area of fine arts in higher education?

Merrion: I think I have the best job on campus! The creative culture is quite stimulating and growth-producing. On a daily basis, our students' work reflects generative hope for humanity. At WMU, we have a public mission "to elevate the human condition through the arts." Recognizing that the arts have documented every civilization, this generation is eager to make its mark. Our students are dedicating their lives to creating or teaching art. They are focused and serious in their work. They have studied the history of their art forms and wish to express their original contributions. They are taking risks. They know there may not be jobs (certainly not well-paying ones) when they graduate. Yet, they persist, because they have something to give society. They inspire me. As dean, it is exciting to wake up each morning and ask myself, "What can I do today to help our students have a first-rate education?" If I can facilitate their success in a small way, I am happy.

Hibel: What are the rewards and challenges associated with your job?

Merrion: The rewards are found in the organizational dynamics and talent -- in addition to our bright student body, working with visionary department leaders, dedicated staff, outstanding faculty and a generous community. The challenges are securing the resources to maintain quality throughout the entire enterprise.

Hibel: What would be your advice to someone who may be interested in pursuing a position in the fine arts in a college or university setting?

Merrion: It's a fabulous career! As a faculty member, you would be wise to bring rigor but not rigidity to the academic program. Establish an expansive network of partners with whom to work to enrich your teaching and creative research. Be ready for the "neXt" generation's expectations for learning, as Mark Taylor describes students who do not want the sage on the stage, but the coach on the side. And it should go without saying, but I'll be deliberate: e-skills are a must.

Hibel: Being in the position of dean, you most likely have the role of providing, directing, motivating, inspiring, and researching in addition to many other responsibilities. How do you manage all of these responsibilities, and what would be your advice to someone who may be aspiring to be in a position like yours?

Merrion: You are right -- the role is multidimensional for a fine arts dean today. Due to the many evening and weekend events on and off-campus, we have 12-14 hour work schedules daily. Yet I derive great joy from witnessing students and faculty members succeed. In the 22 years I've been a dean, I've learned that the faculty expect me to set an inspiring vision and find the resources to realize that vision. How do I do this? I spend about 40 percent of my time establishing the visibility and stature of the college and raising funds for its distinction. I would advise those who wish to be a fine arts dean to develop a repertory of both leadership and management skills, because in addition to articulating vision, planning strategically, ensuring academic integrity, and raising funds, there is plenty of mundane management work. One of the college's philanthropists once told me, "The arts are too important to leave to artists to manage." I think this was a left-handed compliment that the dean has important work -- perhaps as significant as artists'

work; however, one cannot do everything (especially being an artist or scholar) at the same time. So finding the balance to lead, manage, and, on rare occasion, research is a fine art in itself.

All opinions expressed by Dr. Margaret Merrion are her own and do not necessarily reflect those of HigherEdJobs.

1. <http://www.changemag.org/Archives/Back%20Issues/September-October%202009/abstract-prophecy-for-arts.html>
2. <http://blog.westaf.org/>
3. <http://wmich.edu/maps/>
4. Barrow, Behr, et. al. Embedding Employability into a Classics Curriculum: The Classical Civilisation Bachelor of Arts Programme at Roehampton University. Arts and Humanities in Higher Education October 2010 9: 339-352
5. Q1 2011 HigherEdJobs Employment Report <http://www.higheredjobs.com/career/quarterly-report.cfm>

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Janet E. Rubin • 7 years ago

Great interview!

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George • 7 years ago

This is BS. period. As an artist I resent this examination as nothing more than claptrap. I have asked several Doctors and a few lawyers who their favorite artists were to no avail. In one lawyer's office there was a terrible landscape on the wall that hadn't been clean since it was purchased at walmart.

K - 12 education has offered up the arts first as unnecessary and not cost effective which will translate into higher education as a travesty. Can you imagine Leonardo Da Vinci without any creativity?

Education and the government's constant cry for math and science sound like a child crying for his second piece of cake. As I have said in many other blogs of the ether: man pursues 5 activities. They are: Art, science, religion, history, and philosophy. Without them we are nothing more than our ancient ancestors of the paleolithic era even they were creative or you wouldn't be here!

creativity.....even they were creative or you wouldn't be here:

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S.R. Wallace, MFA · 7 years ago

Thanks for your enthusiasm and vision for the arts. But, the public education system is being strangled by folks who really don't know what it's like in today's classroom. After 25 years in the classroom, I want to either give back to the profession in higher ed or go the community arts center route. Here in the coastal south where vacationing is King and education is not as valued, I find more alternative educational settings more popular and enjoyable.

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C.D. McCloud Art Educator and · 7 years ago

The intersection of 2 and 3 dimensional arts and business is called entrepreneurship. In its lowest common denominator it is creativity.

The common cliché "Back to the drawing Board" is not the same as back to the business board.

Innovation is much sought after and some would dare call it creativity. Big business is starved for innovative products to put on the shelf.

When higher education catches on to the idea that creative entrepreneurship is valuable, then higher Ed will teach and profit from patents and designs.

Do people watch performers and actors? Yes

Do people like textiles? yes

Were they taught to use tactile awareness? no

Do people realize these computer screens are rectangles within rectangles they are interacting with? Probably not.

Can we go to higher ed and get a useful degree in Entrepreneurial design and creativity? No

This shows me how we need to revamp Art Ed and take it "Back to the DRAWING board".

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Anku Golloh, Ph.D. · 7 years ago

The need to incorporate entrepreneurial education and community partnership into our fine arts programs is very crucial. Through my initiative as a professor of graphic design, my college has set an advisory committee who are business leaders and experts in graphic arts industry. Their primary role is to meet once or twice every year with our faculty to evaluate our programs and suggest things to do to prepare our students for the job market. This has not only brought a lot of dynamism into our programs but also increased our students' employability rate.

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Kristina Faragher · 7 years ago

Thank you for your insights on art education. I have taught fine-art at both the secondary and post-secondary levels and I am a practicing artist in the global community. Through these experiences, I have come to realize a similar truth: an interdisciplinary application is essential in order for the students to make the leap of translating creative thinking and problem solving into resource and satisfying careers. Nurturing this skill set will surely weigh in on the survival of the planet, we need very creative minds at work in the generation to come!

Kristina Faragher, MFA

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Alice Longworth · 7 years ago

This is a comment on how to design for readability. Most of the lines in this article contain some 24 words. More than twice as many as is comfortable for readers (we get "lost" getting back to the beginning of the next line after the end of the previous). Ask any designer you know and trust. I found the readability issue so frustrating I gave up on the article, even though it seemed to have much interesting content. I feel too pressed for time to "waste" it on frustration.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



adjunctinNYC · 7 years ago

I appreciated reading the dean's comments. I've worked as an adjunct prof in a studio art dept for 4 years. and

while I would like to get a full time gig there are very few jobs opening up in tenure track positions. I've worked very hard to develop international and national lines on my CV, which is what my profs did to get jobs. But, there are fewer full time jobs for my generation, and the older generation hangs on to those spots well past the time they should retire, like the dean suggests. When they do leave, schools hire 2 or 3 adjuncts in their place; without benefits. I have a MFA from a top ten school, and I can't get health insurance! I've figured out the amount my school bills against what they pay me to teach a full enrolled 4 credit course, they take in roughly 68 thousand in tuition and pay me 4400. It's depressing. And I'm one of the "lucky" ones with a job.

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Kimberly Chismark, MBA · 7 years ago

As a substitute teacher I have taught (K-12) for 5 yrs. I was in insurance 11 yrs. As a broker of private clients in insurance you see people who invest in large personal art collections worth a fortune. Recently, I was in Andy Warhol's museum in Pitt and one of his paintings alone is worth millions. Our kids graduated recently from private colleges and again although they were business majors, my daughters art background has helped her to start a small business using her art on the side and she still has a successful business career as our son does. Yes, I also have subbed art classes and yes art is creativity we can use in marketing or fundraising or for pleasure to enrich life and should be a priority along with all areas of interest. We all have different gifts/skill levels to develop. Art probably has made more money than many other disciplines when compared. Each has an important role to play. We must educate all people on these facts to keep art education up there with the math and science and language and technology priorities.

Kim Chismark, MBA

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Michael Godey → Kimberly Chismark, MBA · 7 years ago

Art is not stock. Yet there are those who see it as investment. That misses the mark and many artists never see the money or the sales. Bad example. Try creating a market for lower priced art that most artists produce, which is the price of some of that investment art when those "blue chip" artists were alive. Create royalty laws for art resold done by living artists.

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G. Victoria Landrum, Ph.D. · 7 years ago

This is problematic. My dissertation research in 2004 indicated a strong isomorphic trend towards *professionalization* for faculty in the visual arts and design fields:

<http://www.svada-research.org>

However, the danger in that scenario is possible development of an "insider/outsider" culture among artists in the academy versus those who bravely and courageously forge ahead outside of its purview.

It's also extremely frustrating to current arts faculty trained as previous generations wherein the MFA was the accepted terminal degree -- and still IS in many institutions. The added burden of DFA, DArch DDes studies for those who have already been stressed financially and barely make ends meet is less than fair.

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Michael Godey · 7 years ago

A more serious questions are how are we going to work with overpopulation, environment and live in a world shifting from expansion to sustainability. Add to the mix the present decline of the US through war and corruption. The future of art is dependent on the results. No future teller here, but I think that greater decentralizing art due to changes in transportation, energy use, and economic structure are long over due. Of course if the US heads as it is going now, art will become more conservative or commercial no matter the media. For example Ford is a large corporation. Don't expect to much there. Artists are simply the doers of the what of the CEOs and their profits. Art in medicine, and unrealized potential in music have much to offer, but to birth that may need political and social action. Arts organizations need to get involved in politics through more than the over centralized groups such as American for the Arts and give vocal and active support to specific art related political issues such as royalties and

America for the Arts and give vocal and active support to specific art related political issues such as royalties, and other political and economic issues. Also without the redistribution of wealth doom and gloom are the best in the near future. Without better distribution of wealth non classical music will fare the best because of the internet and the lower cost of producing results. Few other arts translate well digital specially non-digital visual fine art, **theater**, sculpture which could decrease in quality and amount. Other arts will suffer. A shift away from neo-Ayn Rand selfishness, corporate collectivism, and private club religions could help a great deal

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Victoria Hanks · 7 years ago

With all due respect to the interviewer and interviewee, this is a useless conversation. Academia is not a place for fine art overall. Art was not always taught in colleges. We might need to go back to workshops with apprentices, to learn what is needed to support existing businesses, which could mean working for oneself as a portraitist or working for a company as an animator. A job as a teacher is a wonderful thing if it pays enough to live and allows one to pay back their student loans. The only avenue for MFAs used to be to become a tenured professor. It is irresponsible for universities to suggest that MFAs can expect to hold these positions--they no longer exist except for a handful of ivy league graduates.

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Michael Godey · 7 years ago

Since this interview is directly on higher education, often what schools of higher education have in common with WalMart is the exploitation of part time employees, i.e. in the use of underpaid adjunct instructors, common in the areas of art. The future is our's to build more than predict, so take this comment to heart.

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