

3 QUESTIONS

THINKING BIG: Accepted wisdom holds that creativity is something that an individual tends to be endowed with at birth, an inherited trait akin to brown eyes or big ears. But recent research has revealed that creativity is not simply a product of personality or psychology, but a skill that can be taught and learned.

Steven J. Tepper, who teaches sociology at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn., where he helps direct the Curb Center for Art, Enterprise and Public Policy, will speak about the importance of fostering creativity on the 21st-century campus in a Feb. 3 lecture at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley.

Called "Creative Work and the Work of Creativity: How Colleges and Universities Can Prepare Graduates to Reinvent the World," the talk will take place at 4:30 p.m. in Gamble Auditorium and will be followed by a reception. The lecture will be presented in conjunction with the special exhibition "Artists and the Noble Profession: The 2012 Mount Holyoke College Studio Art Faculty Exhibition," which runs from Feb. 3 through May 27 at the college's art museum.

Tepper, who is a leading writer and speaker on U.S. cultural policy, spoke with Briefing Tuesday about his upcoming talk and shared some of his views on the importance of fostering creativity on today's campuses.

— PHOEBE MITCHELL

Q: Recent research suggests that creativity is not just product of personality, but something that can be taught and learned. Can you talk a little about what this research has shown?

A: There's no question that psychologists and cognitive scientists have shown that there are some personality dispositions, psychological dispositions that are related to creativity, but most of our ideas about creativity are kind of mythologies that we create in our society because we like to lionize and (view) our creative individuals as being these solo geniuses that come out as prodigies and we just have to get out of their way.

But there's all kinds of social environments we can construct to either facilitate or retard creative development in everybody, and plenty of cognitive scientists have kind of decomposed the processes that creative people use to solve problems and shown that creative work is much less about epiphanies and intuitions and more about deliberate thinking processes — and that those processes can be learned. ...

We also know that there's other kinds of incentives we can put in place that can either



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Steven J. Tepper, a sociology professor at Vanderbilt University, will talk about the role of creativity on college campuses Feb. 3 at Mount Holyoke College.

foster or inhibit creativity. So, for example, we know that creativity requires the ability to take risks and to fail and so it's interesting to think about how we set up our colleges and universities, and think about how exactly do we allow students to fail.

Q: Can you talk about the idea of a creative campus and what it would look like compared to the traditional college campus.

A: I think every campus has to figure out what their own combination of elements look like. What we're emphasizing at Vanderbilt is more interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving. ... So rather than organizing classes simply along disciplinary lines and expertise, we think about what's a problem or a theme, and then what are the various perspectives or disciplines that can inform us and help us solve that problem effectively.

We're looking at more nonroutine uses of space, so how can we make a campus a more surprising place where we are confronted by ideas and voices in ways that we aren't expecting. How can you integrate the creativity and dimensions of art and culture into other domains of learning? We're thinking about the whole process of design thinking as a way of approaching course work and problems. We're helping students think about their expressive agility. It's one thing to have a creative idea; it's another to convince somebody that your

idea is a good one. ...

I think we're looking at more opportunities for collaborative laboratory-like learning experiences where students are working in teams to solve community or campus problems. ... It's about surprise and serendipity and campus experiences. ...

It really means placing creativity front and center in the way we organize campus life.

Q: Why is this important?

A: There are the economic reasons. There are plenty of economists and social critics who say American competitiveness will require us to basically invent — that's where intellectual property is, that's media, that's where our economic advantage is, so we need to prepare students for those kinds of jobs.

The economy no longer is a direct career path. People are going to have six or seven or eight careers in their life. ... To navigate that kind of world you need to be resilient, you need to be creative, to be able to work with lots of people, to find resources and make them happen.

There's also a relationship between creativity and citizenship. ...

In an increasingly global and complicated world where we all are hoping to make a difference, I think being able to work out a creative thought and see it happen, whether small or big, gives people a sense of achievement and a sense that their creative voice matters.