

Artistic Creativity, Community, and Well-Being

CAFFEINE-FUELED LAMENTS

We, the three coauthors, met at our favorite coffee shop, exhausted by being pulled in too many directions. Our original intention was to talk about outcomes emerging from our team-based research project, *Building a Creative Campus: Learning Through Performance*. Instead, we found ourselves engaged in familiar discussions of burnout. We bemoaned our shared experiences of wading through various illnesses and angst derived from the state of contemporary geopolitics, and our inability to find sufficient time to recover physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Our fervid need to rush back to work before fully addressing these challenges exemplifies a larger anxiety that attends to the notion of productivity in contemporary university culture. We each continue to wrestle with what Megha Anwer aptly describes as the “insidious normalization of relentless productivity” [1], which is in stark contrast to the heightened language of self-care embedded within the rhetoric of neoliberal institutions [2].

Our shared feelings of unraveling (Fig. 1)—of fraying at the edges while desperately trying to keep our core fabric intact—mirrored findings from our shared in-depth research project. For this project, we examined what faculty, staff, and students understand “creativity” to mean, if and how they experience creativity in their lives, and the extent to which they engage in artistic endeavors. For the first part of this project, we co-conducted a large-scale survey with approximately 3,000 responses at Western University and its three affiliate colleges. This Qualtrics-based survey included open text box, check-all-that-apply, multiple-choice, and Likert scale questions. Our team then conducted a series of eight non-identifying, interdisciplinary focus group discussions with a range of faculty, staff, and students from across the four campuses to gain greater insight into how individuals feel about creativity writ large and the potential role of the arts in their academic work/careers and personal lives.

CREATIVITY, COMMUNITY, AND WELL-BEING: ESCHEWING THE METRICS

The most significant result emerging from this two-part research project is that participants want more joy in their on-campus lifeworlds and that having additional time, space, and

freedom to engage in creative, artistic activities—regardless of potential outcomes—would significantly improve their overall health and well-being. Nurturing artistic creativity for its own sake is not incompatible with the roles it can play in opening pathways for research, pedagogy, and praxis-oriented discoveries and undertakings. Indeed, well-being and productivity are not mutually exclusive. However, students, faculty, and staff alike said they want to focus on the process of being creative rather than feeling pressured to demonstrate its “value” in metrics-oriented terms—they do not want creativity to be subsumed by a system’s instrumental rationality. Research participants painted complex pictures of their fraught experiences with structured timelines, rigid systems of learning, and expectations of instrumental outcomes. Such personal accounts were interwoven with participants’ fervent desire to engage in curiosity-driven discoveries and artistic undertakings to nurture their emotional and intellectual well-being.

By focusing on the value of “process rather than output” [3], these participants sought to shift attention away from a metrics orientation that has become deeply ingrained in the university system. Students (from across the disciplines) were the most vocal on this topic, expressing frustration with the pressure they feel to pursue only activities that lead to clear end results that can be evaluated by a specific letter or number. They also eschewed focusing exclusively on narrowly defined skill sets geared toward specific expectations of their roles in the labor force post-graduation. For example, a recently graduated arts and humanities doctoral student said that their entire cohort has

picked up some sort of artistic or creative hobby now that we have finished the program and the reason we didn’t during the program was because the culture was so focused on productivity that everything you were supposed to be doing was supposed to be to further your scholarly goals in some way. . . . Certainly, we would have all been better off mentally if we had incorporated some time for individual personal creative pursuits while we were also pursuing our academic goals.

In a similar vein, an undergraduate student in engineering expressed concern for their peers who “don’t have creative

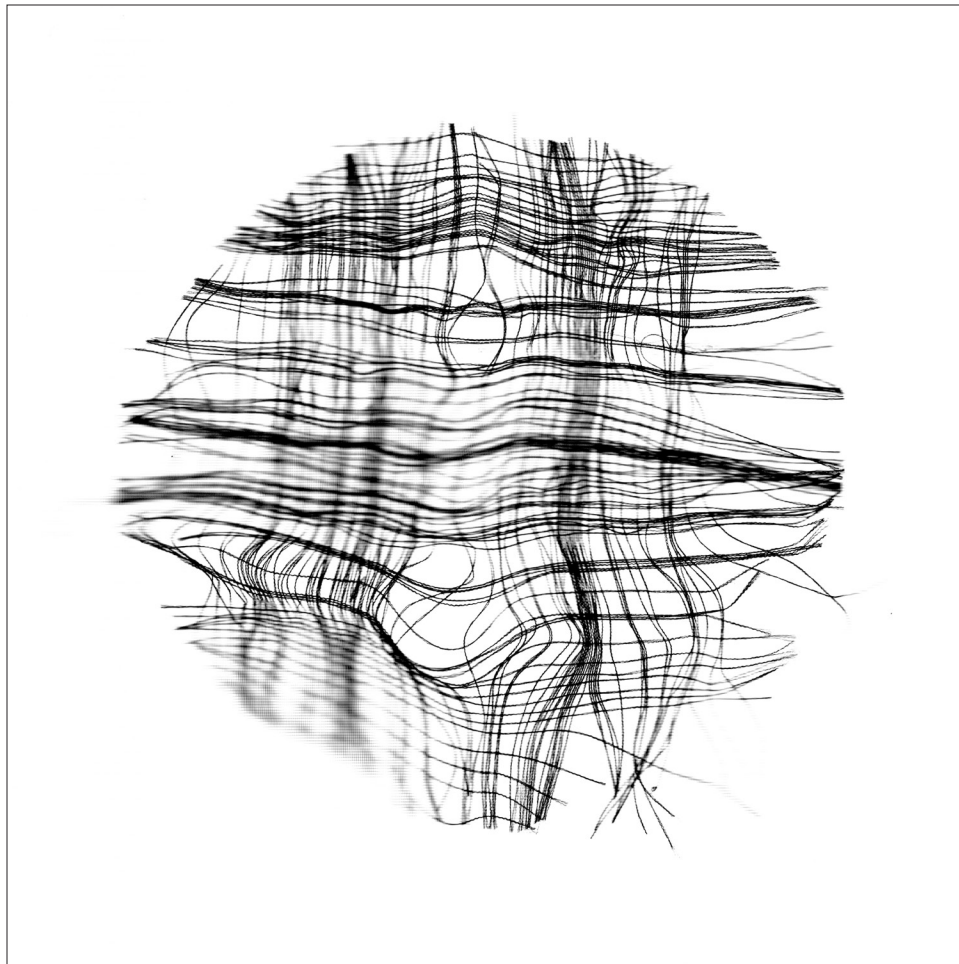


Fig. 1. *untitled/unraveling*, 2022. (© Maria Kouznetsova)

opportunities, because they are, I believe, more prone like I was to really noticing the struggles of the mental health issues.” Likewise, faculty and staff expressed frustration with an academic system that does not nurture individual or collaborative artistic processes unless they lead to certain types of outcomes that, as one staff member described, “benefit its [the university’s] brand.”

Concomitantly, focus group participants from all three constituencies were critical of the wellness discourse promulgated by their respective institutions. Numerous individuals expressed frustration with the paradoxical language of well-being amidst the effusion of services aimed at bolstering mental wellness [4]. They described this discourse as being closely tied to expectations of productivity, where wellness is characterized as another step toward greater efficiency rather than existing as a goal on its own [5]. Central to these concerns was frustration that universities seem to disengage from conversations regarding the conditions largely responsible for elevated levels of stress and burnout, including increased labor precarity for faculty and staff.

INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Given that survey and focus group participants voluntarily engaged with our creative campus research project, we (per-

haps unfairly) expected to attract individuals predominantly from various arts, humanities, and social science disciplines. Instead, our demographic information revealed a remarkably equal distribution across all our campuses’ faculties. Of import, focus group participants from traditionally STEM-focused disciplines articulated an ardent desire for opportunities to engage in creative activities, including artistic forms of expression within and beyond their respective faculties. In fact, some of the most passionate commentary on this topic came from departments in engineering and medicine. As an undergraduate student in the former faculty commented, “Opportunities for people like myself [sic] who are very analytical—from a hard science-focused background where creativity isn’t always encouraged and appreciated . . . students without creative outlets I think are at a huge disadvantage for the rest of their lives.”

Relatedly, numerous students, staff, and faculty relayed a strong desire to engage in collaborative creative activities across disciplinary lines. They want opportunities, time, and space to co-engage in creative explorations with un/expected individuals outside their disciplinary silos, free from utilitarian exigencies, and without presuppositions of specific outcomes. These research findings reflect similar themes highlighted in the Special Section of *Leonardo*, Science and Art: Understand-

ing the Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue, guest edited by Baker and Gilchrist (2021–2023). Focusing on the *process* of creation, this collection of articles underscores the importance of relationship-building between individuals and disciplines, and that the “true potential of interdisciplinarity . . . is not always where we might expect it to be” [6].

WEAVING TOGETHER ARTISTIC CREATIVITY AND WELLNESS

Many of our research participants raised concerns that if they or we call for more time, space, and opportunities to be creative, university administrators may reappropriate such creativity to enhance productivity in much the same way as with the wellness discourse discussed above. As a central office staff member averred, “We need freedom to be creative, not prescribed it so we’re feeling happier and can then do more work stuff.” However, despite the recent turn (especially post-pandemic) to well-being as a key focus in universities, the performance expectations of the academy feel as strong as ever [7,8]. These exigencies have, as a faculty member from social sciences disclosed, left them feeling “overwhelmed” from “always doing things that . . . get me something to put on my CV. I mean, I know that’s important. But what about also doing things that make me happy. . . . That would keep me here.”

Our research captured responses from three constituencies that illustrate the potential of creative, artistic processes to help foment such overall well-being. Our call for creating and fostering artistic spaces and communities is thus fiercely resistant to the instrumentalization of creative practices. In-

stead, it embraces well-being as both our starting point and our shared ethos. Based on our findings, we contend that universities must support transdisciplinary communities of practice for artistic endeavors to foster well-being, which can, in turn, shift a prescriptive view of artistic endeavors in favor of the whole person.

In writing this statement, we showed ourselves compassion by slowing down and talking through and across our disciplinary borders about the personal and academic elements woven into our shared journeys of creativity, discovery, and meaningful living. In so doing, we found joy in exploring how fraying and coming apart can be part of the process.

SANDRA SMELTZER

*Faculty of Information and Media Studies
Western University
London, ON, N6A 5B9
Canada
Email: ssmeltze@uwo.ca.*

AMALA POLI

*Faculty of Arts & Humanities
Western University
Email: apoli@uwo.ca.*

MARIA KOUZNETSOVA

*Faculty of Arts & Humanities
Western University
Email: mkouzne@uwo.ca.*

References

- 1 Megha Anwer, “Academic Labor and the Global Pandemic: Revisiting Life-Work Balance under COVID-19,” *Susan Bulkeley Butler Center for Leadership Excellence and ADVANCE Working Paper Series* 3, No. 2 (2020) p. 6.
- 2 Alison Mountz et al., “For Slow Scholarship: A Feminist Politics of Resistance through Collective Action in the Neoliberal University,” *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 14, No. 4, 1235–1259 (2015).
- 3 Catherine Baker and Iain Gilchrist, “Science and Art: Understanding the Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue,” *Leonardo* 54, No. 3 (2021) p. 344.
- 4 Sarah Treleaven, “Inside the Mental Health Crisis at Canadian Universities,” *Maclean’s Education* (14 November 2022): education.macleans.ca/feature/inside-the-mental-health-crisis-at-canadian-universities (accessed 12 December 2023).
- 5 Colleen Derkatch, “The Self-Generating Language of Wellness and Natural Health,” *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine* 1, No. 1 (2018), p. 133.
- 6 Baker and Gilchrist [3].
- 7 Gerardo Gómez-García et al., “Impact of COVID-19 on University Students: An Analysis of Its Influence on Psychological and Academic Factors,” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 19, No. 16 (2022) p. 10433; doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191610433.
- 8 Mie Plotnikof and Ea Høg Utoft, “The ‘New Normal’ of Academia in Pandemic Times: Resisting Toxicity through Care,” *Gender, Work & Organization* 29, No. 4, 1259–1271 (2022).