



Sculpting the Mind

The Importance of Art in Education

The term “liberal arts” has its roots in the Middle Ages, when it referred to the study of arithmetic, grammar, rhetoric, logic, geometry, astronomy and music. Today, it refers to the idea of a college education that prepares students to function in a diverse, complex world, gaining knowledge in a range of subjects and learning how to solve problems, analyze information and view life from different perspectives.

“Liberal arts in general makes you literate for society,” says Michelle Kulp McEliece, PhD, chairperson of Gwynedd-Mercy College’s biology division.

And one critical piece of the liberal arts is, well, art.

Longtime GMC English professor Carol Breslin, PhD, says the arts are a vital component to the very idea of higher education. Students’ purpose in college isn’t just to get a degree so they can secure a good job, she says – it’s to develop an understanding of civilization and the meaning of humanity.

Art’s impact on campus and in the community

Sophomore Ashley Scheiber came to

Gwynedd-Mercy College to study nursing. She soon switched her major to English, deciding that she would rather cultivate her love of reading and writing and turn that into a career. That’s just one example of what the college experience is supposed to be about: students identifying what they are good at, what they enjoy and how that connects to what their life’s work should be. This, she says, is why all students should be exposed to the arts, perhaps through a required class or two. “Maybe they’d be able to discover things about themselves,” Scheiber says. “In order to find your calling, I feel, you have to explore every possibility.”

During his nearly half-century of teaching at the College before retiring in 2008, Jules Tasca, DA, created fond memories for countless students by directing a play on campus every fall in addition to teaching courses in cinema, drama and creative writing. Tasca, who has more than 125 published plays to his credit, wrote some of the Valley Players’ productions himself, tailoring them to the performance venue and the number of males and females taking part each year. It would be a different show every time.

A live theater performance is something everyone on campus can enjoy and learn from, says Tasca, who introduced a theater concentration in the English department during his time at GMC.

“To me, the arts are the soul of a college, because they’re dealing with what makes us human,” he says. “When you’re watching a play, you’re watching us being human – if it’s a good play.”

Similarly, the Voices of Gwynedd, a choir made up of students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends, has traveled the world sharing its musical talents. “The group is one of the best ambassadors for the College,” says Lisa Coughlin McGarry, PhD, interim dean of the School of Arts & Sciences.

The Voices of Gwynedd has performed at Philadelphia Phillies, Eagles and Flyers games and appeared on tours in locales like Alaska, Italy and Ireland. People throughout the community know about Gwynedd-Mercy College because of this talented ensemble, whose Carol Nights fill the Julia Ball Auditorium each Christmas season. But one of its most meaningful performances took place in November at the Crossroads Hospice in Horsham, Pa.

The hospice grants patients' wishes for a special day, and an elderly patient had asked for the Voices of Gwynedd to sing for her. So one Saturday, Carol Evans, MM, assistant professor of music/education and director of the choir, gathered 20 singers to perform at the hospice. Their repertoire included religious songs like "River in Judea," Motown hits and a traditional Irish blessing.

"She just cried the whole time we sang," Evans recalls.

Junior Brandon Ellis says singing tenor in the Voices of Gwynedd gives him a much-needed break from his studies along with the chance to continue the love of singing he developed as a member of his high school choir. "It helps get away from the stress of writing 15-page papers," says Ellis, a psychology major.

The same is true for visual arts. Adjunct faculty member Karen Kieser, MFA, says a lot of students take her four art classes because they are looking for something fun and different.

Gwynedd-Mercy College doesn't offer a major in art and students here might not have the same expressive abilities as one might find at an art school, but Kieser's aim is to teach the same fundamentals that art majors learn. She starts with teaching the basics of drawing, using concepts like proportion, ratios and perspective. Many students find they have an aptitude for art that they didn't know about.

Assets for future careers

Because visual art uses the intuitive right side of the brain rather than the logical left side, Kieser says students who are literate in it can more easily find creative ways to solve problems. As an illustration she mentions the TV drama *House*, in which a team of experts, led by an unconventional physician, uses its creativity to solve medical puzzles in each episode.

GMC students majoring in scientific fields are seeking minors in disparate subjects like art and Spanish, McEliece notes. These subjects also add a different dimension to the knowledge students take to their future jobs, she says, giving the example of aspiring dentists learning how to sculpt and applying these skills to work with teeth.

"A large part of what they need to do is fine motor manipulation," McEliece says. "Part of dentistry is art in itself."

Acting on stage is another way for people to express themselves and learn how to speak in public. Tasca, whose son is an attorney, points out that lawyers use stage presence techniques in the courtroom – just think of football legend O.J. Simpson's 1995 double-murder trial, which dominated TV screens nationwide.

Sophomore Matt Agos, an education major and tenor in the Voices of Gwynedd, plans to incorporate music into a future career in

special education. During his senior year in high school, he remembers, his English teacher would play music in the classroom and ask students to write journal entries with the songs as inspiration. He looks forward to taking courses where he can learn techniques for using music as an instructional tool in his own classroom someday.

Kieser uses art as an instructional tool of her own. Students who learn the fundamentals of artistic expression learn a different way of communicating their ideas. Since she asks students to assess each other's work, they learn how to accept constructive criticism. Spending hours on a project provides practice in persevering and completing tasks by themselves.

"We need people to work in teams," Kieser says. "We also need to be able to take a thought and explore it deeply."

Besides serving as an outlet for students' creativity and a way to stay involved in artistic interests they may have developed in high school, McEliece says that art could make students more attractive applicants to employers and professional schools. "There's a greater emphasis on being well-rounded now than there ever was before." 🌟



(Opposite page) Carol Evans, assistant professor of music and director of the Voices of Gwynedd, leads some of the choir members during practice.

Adjunct faculty member Karen Kieser teaches students the fundamentals of drawing.