Arts Integration as a Catalyst for High School Renewal

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The director of a small career academy of the arts in a public high school reflects on the conflicting demands to establish a college-preparatory program adhering to state standards and to facilitate the personal growth, artistic discovery, and democratic empowerment of teens. By narrating experiences that go to the heart of philosophical discord, the author reveals the schisms between interest-based and compulsory learning among students, teachers, and administration that threaten the program’s continuance. Questioning the evolution of the academy, teachers’ readiness to participate in a democratic arts community, and the director’s contradictory role as an advocate for both innovative student-centered learning and traditional academic achievement does not diminish the positive contributions the arts academy had made on the lives of participating students, the overall high school, and the local community.

Woodlands High School,¹ located in a rural community in the Northeastern United States, was an unlikely location to launch an arts academy in the fall of 2003. Begun as a classical public college-preparatory academy over a century ago, Woodlands served approximately 400 students, 97% of whom possessed European heritage and 33% qualified for free or reduced meals. A small but committed group of administrators and teachers had shared a vision to create an experiential yet academically vigorous pathway for a small “community of artists,” as described by one student who participated in the planning year. Woodlands’ success with initiatives in personalized and community-based learning had led to the High School Reform Career Academies Pilot grant award of $200,000 to establish a career academy in a vocational field cluster. What follows is an encapsulation of the first 2 years of the Integral Vision of the Arts (IVA, pronounced “Eva”), its program, pitfalls, and possibilities for school practitioners and arts leaders to consider during this crucial time of secondary school renewal. As a work in progress, the results of early program implementation cannot conclude with definitive resolve, or promise potential generalization to other school reforms. However, Janesick (2003) offers that “the value of the case study is its uniqueness” with which to discuss “powerful statements … that uncover the meanings of events in individuals’ lives” (p. 70).

First, a brief background on two current movements in progressive high school reform—career academies and arts integration—maps out the framework in which IVA was originally conceived. Second, an overview of the curriculum defines the program’s emphases and parameters. Third, the service-learning component is illuminated to expose the program’s greatest potential as well as to portray its struggles within the traditional school structure. A critical incident involving students and Woodlands’ principal exemplifies the fissures between the vision and reality of school change. Fourth, a reflection on the factors that contributed to IVA’s success and the obstacles that curbed further growth are

¹A pseudonym, as are all names mentioned in the text.
shared. In conclusion, the analysis of this case study presents several suggestions to both inspire and caution those undertaking secondary school renewal.

Three sources provided the data utilized in the study. As the director of the Integral Vision of the Arts, I share the lived experience that began in the earliest planning stages through its first two years. In addition, a university researcher conducted a comprehensive evaluation of IVA during the pilot year, employing both quantitative and qualitative methods to apprehend the views of students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community members. Students’ articles, administrative memos, and other artifacts relevant to the issues raised also contributed to data collection.

**Background**

Underway in American high schools is a movement to reform the structure and delivery of education (Levine, 2001; National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004; Pearlman, 2002; Sizer, 1995; Vermont Department of Education, 2002). Dividing large institutions into smaller learning communities (Ayers, Bracey, & Smith, 2000; Johnson, 2002), decreasing the ratio of teachers to students (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004), implementing differentiated classroom activities (National Association of Secondary School Principals, 2004; Vermont Department of Education, 2002) and authentic assessments (Levine, 2001; Meier, 1995), connecting career planning, expanding alternative learning opportunities, and encouraging active student involvement in school life predominate the current discourse on secondary level reform (Apple & Beane, 1995; Sizer, 2002, 1995). The career academy model, begun in 1969, encompasses three elements that reflect current shifts in high school design: the creation of a small learning community of faculty and students committed to shared learning goals; a focus on a specific career cluster, such as the arts, technology, science, business, humanities, and health, among others; and the utilization of various and hands-on instructional strategies to reach a heterogeneous student body. National studies demonstrate increased academic achievement in the secondary and postsecondary levels as a result of career academy education (Kemple & Snipes, 2000; Stern, Dayton & Raby, 2000).

While drafting the grant proposal for Woodlands High School, we formed memoranda of understanding with the regional vocational center, the county Workforce Investment Board, and REAL Enterprises in order to attract funding, though these connections made no clear link with the career academy when it opened 18 months later. We chose the arts for its promise of serving those who aspired toward careers in theater, music, and the visual arts as well as the whole student body with a greater number of enrichment opportunities. Although the practice of arts integration varies widely, it may be defined as embedding the arts with other disciplines in order to augment student learning in both areas. Frequently, artists-in-residence serve as technical experts and team with classroom teachers to enhance students’ cultural experience and skill development. The intellectual and experiential confluence facilitated by the arts can expand students’ imagination, strengthen their cognitive abilities, and increase their motivation to scholastically achieve. The effectiveness of arts education is
well documented in Champions of Change: The Impact of the Arts on Learning (Fiske, 1999), Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Achievement and Social Development (Deasy, 2002), and The Progress of Education Reform 2004: The Arts in Education (Education Commission of the States, 2004). This vision, often articulated by the principal at the time, finally had a chance to take root when the grant was awarded in the spring of 2002. In short order, a teacher from each of the English, science, and social studies departments and I, the personal learning plan coordinator, signed onto the initiative. The following year I set to work, coordinating professional development opportunities for participating teachers and designing the framework based on career academy literature and democratic pedagogy.

Unlike the established methods and empirical results of career academy and arts-integrated education, the theory, practice, and effectiveness of democratic education defies singular definition. Dixon (1998) identifies three strains of democratic education, liberal, participatory, and community, the latter of which, rooted in principles of diversity, equity, and justice, was fused in the Integral Vision of the Arts. Central to community democracy is the deliberation among and between diverse constituencies dedicated to education for social justice, who together work toward solutions for positive change (Rusch, 1994, 1995). Common elements include frequent dialogue to foster critical consciousness (Freire, 1993; Lambert, 1995), opportunities to address issues of concern (Calabrese & Barton, 1994; Giroux, 1985, 1997, 2005; Johnson & Pajares, 1996; Slater, 1994), student participation in the development of curricular content and activities (Apple & Beane, 1995; Glickman, 2003; Kohn, 1999; Meier, 1995; Sizer, 1995), the formation of a multicultural perspective (Banks & Banks, 1993; Maxcy, 1998), the encouragement of beliefs in freedom and social justice (de los Reyes & Gozumba, 2002; Dixon, 1998; Greene, 1978, 1995), and authentic learning experiences and assessments (Apple & Beane, 1995; Kohn, 1999; Meier, 1995). During the planning year, the three core subject teachers restructuring their curricula to integrate the arts were far less concerned with democratic pedagogy than with developing suitable assessments. As a team, we made decisions by consensus, though we often deferred to one another’s expertise when discussing curriculum. In this spirit, the faculty assumed that my uncontested content area of character and community education was limited to the subjects I taught. When spring arrived, the promising learning pathway was promoted to potential student candidates, skeptical parents, local artists, and Woodlands’ new administrative team. A new principal had been hired whose commitment to establishing a school-within-a-school was not forthcoming, but officials at the supervisory union and state department of education hoped for its rapid growth into a regional magnet program.

Program Overview

In the fall of 2003, just 6% of the junior and senior class had applied to the Integral Vision of the Arts, forming the first artist community cohort of 11 students. Although an application for enrollment had been created, fewer than half the students formally applied; the others simply informed their guidance counselor of their intentions. Because the only requisite was the attainment of junior standing or reaching 16 years of age, the required statement of
purpose, letter of recommendation, and demonstration of talent became moot. The guidance department and I had grown anxious for students, and with 11 far short of our goal of 20, the prescribed application process was abandoned. Although few in number, they represented Woodlands’ socioeconomic and academic range, from high achievers to those at risk of dropping out. The program included two academic courses, an arts class, and the Advisory, following the same schedule as the rest of the school, with four 80-minute blocks. Although somewhat incompatible with IVA’s mission, in order to secure minimum enrollment and attract potential candidates, Woodlands juniors and seniors could sign up for nearly all IVA academic and arts courses, though IVA students enjoyed first priority. Additional courses students needed for graduation, such as mathematics and physical education, were available through the general program of studies.

The career academies grant provided professional time for developing specialized courses. A social studies and English teacher composed two Humanities courses dedicated to American studies, alternating 16th-19th and 20th centuries every year. Each unit of the layered curriculum incorporated a different arts genre, such as dancing inspired by the Romantic period, cartooning in conjunction with the muckrakers, and mural painting reflecting the 1960s. The IVA Environmental Science course included botanical drawing, bookbinding, and theater-based ecological activism, among other activities. Artists-in-residence working alongside IVA teachers generated a palpable excitement in the classroom that resonated with our many visitors from across the state and country. The Dust Bowl project unified the three subjects as teachers provided instruction on the environmental and social conditions of the time, and with the new content, students wrote original scripts to produce a radio show with a playwright, practiced their roles coached by a theater director, and recorded their performance onto a CD with a sound engineer. During the 2-week lesson, a bluegrass guitarist visited to sing the songs of Woody Guthrie.

Woodlands’ arts teachers rose to the challenge with the boost in funding and professional development. The music teacher offered a music theory course with individual piano instruction by a professional in the community. A part-time theater instructor was hired to teach acting and playwriting. A career photographer offered weekly workshops for students to bring the darkroom out of slumber. I taught a new course, Advanced Visual Arts, to assist students in developing an art portfolio for the college application process. Beginning IVA’s second year, a 21st-Century Community Learning Centers grant funded numerous co-curricular courses, such as music, dance, ceramics, and videography.

Only the Advisory course exclusively served those enrolled in the career academy. The curriculum drew from state standards in communication, problem solving, personal development, and civic responsibility, as well as incorporated the Met School model, wherein students designed their learning with the help of a teacher-advisor (Levine, 2001; Littky & Allen, 1999). The inquisitive and expressive foundation of arts and career education necessitated an orientation that mirrored democratic development: cooperative learning, critical thinking, resourcefulness, entrepreneurialism, and metacognitive growth (Dewey, 1944;
Here, all IVA components cemented to address student aspirations and needs, as well as host arts professionals to teach their craft and business skills. Students outfitted the Advisory classroom as a quasi-professional, high-tech design studio adorned with footprint floors and ceiling puppets, which was frequently redecorated in pursuit of the perfect space. Such interaction maintained a high level of personal accountability among students, and a microculture (Jackson, 2003) revering creativity and originality flourished outside the school mainstream. Although personal learning plans permitted Woodlands students to earn credit for nontraditional, self-designed studies, a democratic learning community was an untried and more than likely unknown concept. Later this discrepancy would become a significant cause of conflict because neither administration, faculty members, nor students possessed prior experience in this capacity. “Implementing” democracy became a major focus in my role as director.

Nearing the end of the pilot year, the school district commissioned an educational researcher to conduct an evaluation of the Integral Vision of the Arts. Participating students and parents completed a questionnaire followed by focus group and telephone interviews. IVA teachers, school administrators, and members of the local arts agency were also interviewed. The report showed that Woodlands’ arts academy indeed met students’ needs, fostered motivation and engagement, and established a positive climate to a greater extent than the traditional classroom. Among the many student praises were the following: “We are adults and make decisions together.” “We’ve learned about each other through our art; we’ve become a community of artists and friends.” “They’re not hounding us; it’s our choice or not. It’s like the real world—you’re not treated like children.” Confirming these sentiments, their parents gave IVA the highest accolades, citing that their children’s newfound joy and purpose in school had transformed their lives.

According to the report, students who had been bored, frustrated, and angry with traditional schooling had now become deeply engaged, active learners in the career academy. Nevertheless, core subject teachers expressed concern over students’ preference for arts activities over academics and field trips removing them from the classroom. Focus on the arts may have inadvertently encouraged a belief among weaker students that academic achievement was secondary. As IVA became known throughout the region and students volunteered to host visitors and present at conferences, teachers grew frustrated with those who were least likely to make up missed work. The evaluation demonstrated that a tension between the arts and academics did indeed exist, since the data revealed that IVA students’ grades and attendance did not necessarily improve as a result of program participation. Despite the flat academic performance, the final report stated that a career academy focus on the arts was viable, that the program positively contributed to school climate, and that all at Woodlands should have access to the Advisory experience by intentionally grouping students and teachers together by common interest, thus encouraging open discussion and allowing students to be themselves.
Service-Learning

When students of the Integral Vision of the Arts and I attended a 2-day leadership retreat held by the State Rural Partnership early in the pilot year, Jubilation was born. Eric, a Woodlands senior both inchoately talented and behaviorally challenging, captured his peers’ imagination with tales of a neighborhood street party in the faraway city of his birth. The vision of a community arts festival, designed and executed entirely by students, had placed the service-learning project at the center of all Advisory activity for the remainder of the school year. Because an outpouring of ideas continually galvanized their efforts, my job concentrated on harnessing their energies toward productivity and efficiency. First, I arranged for three professional arts organizers—one from the State Arts Council, another who headed the state capitol’s annual New Year’s arts celebration, and a third from the county arts agency—to spell out the steps necessary to ensure proper management, safety, and turnout at the event. Adhering to their suggestions, students and I drew up a large calendar, dotted with deadlines in an attempt to leave no stone unturned. Although each of the 11 students joined one or more committees (such as publicity, artist-in-residence, activities, and music), new challenges emerged that required frequent whole-group discussion. These biweekly Jubilation meetings grew in size and scope when the arts agency director, Woodlands’ VISTA volunteer, and other invited community members joined the planning process. Only rarely did faculty members or administrators attend.

Jubilation planners envisioned a weeklong artist-in-residence program involving 200 Woodlands students with a final performance at the festival. When three IVA student representatives and I met at length with a renowned theater troupe to map out a schedule and review technical needs, the actors praised the students’ initiative and maturity, and regarded them, rather than their teachers, as the school liaisons. At the invitation of the local newspaper, students penned the milestones reached throughout the year in weekly press releases accompanied by photos of the work in progress. In this way, every IVA student became a published author. As we expanded to radio and TV broadcasts, I reminded those camera-shy that without continual publicity, Jubilation would remain unknown and hopes for a turnout in the hundreds would be dashed. Three 11th-grade girls proved themselves not only to be competent committee leaders, but persuasive spokespeople when asking local organizations for financial and logistical support. These included the Town Select Board, the Rotary Club, the American Legion, and the local community and state colleges. At the principal’s request, students gave monthly updates at faculty meetings and presented to the school board. Because the career academies grant only covered the artist residency, three IVA students applied for youth leadership grants sponsored by the United Way and the State Rural Partnership, raising over $2,000 for staff t-shirts and music. When the spring semester began, students wove their arts foci with Jubilation goals into their standards-based study plans. During weekly one-on-one meetings to track study progress, we identified short-term tasks to keep festival plans rolling, such as designing venue maps, writing and staging presentations, contacting potential artists and business vendors, ordering supplies, tie-dying and silk-screening t-shirts,
meeting with teachers who signed up their classes for the theater residency, and publicizing the jam stage and reggae concert.

A Critical Incident

Two months before the festival, I received the following memo from Woodlands’s principal, Dr. Jones:

I read in the paper that your students have invited area high school students to come to their event. This did not surface in any conversation that I was a party to. I am very worried about crowd control and all that goes with it. How do we/they propose to manage all this? Note: It took us years to get the sports parade under control, and it’s still not quite OK. We’d better get very clear on how big this is going to get, and who is going to be holding the bag for the not fun stuff that goes with lots of other people’s kids and little or no supervision.

Desperation immediately took hold and my hands clenched with anxiety. What could I say to David, who had just published his first article, which happened to contain the controversial announcement, “We will accept students from all around to come rock out in the sun and spread good vibes”? That very morning he had exclaimed to the Advisory, “I am so psyched! Lots of people saw my name in the paper. They put in the picture, too! My friends really want to go now. This is an amazing day!” David had become inspired to write the press release after learning that we had received our largest grant application to pay for the final event, a concert “under the stars,” of which he was the primary author. I recalled the principal referring to David during career academy planning the previous year. “If you can just find what motivates this kid, it’ll be a success,” he said. “He is so smart but no one has tapped into his intelligence and made school work for him.” Since shared dialogue among diverse constituents is critical to democracy, deferring the decision to the adults in charge would further disempower the student body. At my request, Dr. Jones agreed that we address the matter only with the music committee. Deeply impressed by the dialogue, after the meeting I wrote up what had transpired, a combination of conversation and body language that in my mind opened new doors of possibility at Woodlands.

David, joined by Eric, Jubilation’s original inspiration, and I entered the principal’s office for our scheduled meeting. Smiling, Dr. Jones launched into a thorough explanation of supervision and control at school events, and the need for all participants to feel safe and comfortable. “So far I haven’t done anything but react to your cool plans,” he confessed. “I’ve never brought up any concerns, except changing the date so it wouldn’t conflict with Memorial Day. But this is the same concern that I have for every public event, including the soccer championship.”

David and Eric slouched in their chairs and looked in all directions. Until now, sitting in the principal’s office meant only one thing: punishment.

Dr. Jones’ face grew serious as he folded his arms across his chest and continued. “We need to make sure that this won’t be spoiled by a riot or drinking. For your program, we need to make sure that we’re working together
on making it safe.” He smiled at David. “It wasn’t until I read your article in the paper that I became concerned. A beautifully written article, by the way.”

David momentarily brightened.

“I saw that students from other schools had been invited. This is a real management task, because we wouldn’t want people to leave saying, ‘It was great except for this and that happened,’ or ‘It’s too bad such and such happened or it would’ve been pretty cool.’ It would’ve been better had we talked about this before I read it in the paper, but I should say that any shame here should be on me. Have you thought about the possibility of school rivalry?”

“I don’t think that’s going to happen,” Eric interjected.

“We imagine this to be a very mellow event, for families, you know,” David added.

“We also will have two police officers,” Eric said. “The town’s agreed to pay for them.”

“We want a police presence, not have them there as an assertion. Have you talked to the faculty yet about supervision?” Dr. Jones asked.

“There will be plenty of adults around,” David assured.

“I would urge you to consider asking teachers to participate. You also need to meet with the police and let them know what we want. Also, how about organizing a core of our students to cool out the kids from other schools? Peer involvement will let them know that we’re not doing that here.”

“That’s cool,” Eric agreed. “I know some kids.”

“Compare this to throwing a party; the host is always cleaning up,” Dr. Jones said.

“This is all perfectly reasonable,” David affirmed, “We need to seek the balance between fun and function. I’d be pretty devastated and outraged if our gig was ruined.”

“I appreciate your analogy, that balance. You have been allowed the freedom to do this pretty cool thing, but we also have to accept the responsibility we’ve taken together. I need to let you know, and this might get under your skin a bit. But I am 100% legally responsible for everything that happens in this school. We have a deal going on here, and we have to prepare and pull this off right.”

Career Academy Reflections

That a resolution was momentarily reached between IVA students and the principal did not necessarily alleviate other concerns. As mentioned earlier, as students became accustomed to decision making in the Advisory on their individual artistic endeavors and Jubilation plans, low-performing students failed to transfer this interest to academic course expectations. Some may have even placed the Advisory ahead of graduation requirements in order to intentionally avoid disliked subjects. In the student focus group interview, they shared that they worked for themselves, not for some “random hoop,” and appreciated the real-world environment and the trust in them as adults. Despite their appreciation of arts-integrated projects in English, social studies, and science, such as building models of 20th-century architecture, learning black spirituals, and drawing the changes observed in their “own” trees through the seasons, only
those with a previous record of achievement gave their best effort. Three of
the career academy students often resisted work completion, and were further
discouraged when faced with the many credits still ahead as a consequence of
past failures. As Woodlands served a small population, teachers had struggled
with them earlier, and had anticipated that arts engagement would solve the
academic difficulties, as research has shown (Education Commission of the
States, 2004). However, seeing engagement in areas other than their courses
may have replaced that hope with a distrust of intrinsic motivation, as weaker
students chose to complete tasks that held meaning for them over traditional
school expectations.

The second year tipped the balance between highly motivated and at-risk
students as guidance counselors increasingly recommended seniors to enroll
in Advanced Placement courses instead of IVA options. Enrollment in the
Advisory became voluntary for IVA students due to the need for “scheduling
flexibility,” encouraging high achievers to attend the most competitive courses
and placing low performers into career academy classes. Concurrently, the regu-
lations of No Child Left Behind seeped into Woodlands’ school-wide goals,
placing Adequate Yearly progress ahead of meaningful engagement. To bridge
this gap, I suggested to IVA colleagues that we seek greater imagination in
problem solving, which is “a position that is seen as “mad” by many others in
a particular community,” reinforced by the inherited conservatism of schools,
where “norms, traditions, a priori commitments, images, and so forth, … limit
our ability to be human and to imagine” (Gitlin, 2005, p. 18). I sought to appease
the demand for results by demonstrating student growth in public
speaking, writing, the arts, technology, and organization, and showcasing our
collaboration with field professionals who broadened their career horizons.
Because students had demonstrated success in the two elective courses I taught,
teachers may have perceived all academic progress as the director’s respon-
sibility. What they failed to apprehend, and I hesitated to emphasize was, that
although students were passionate about the arts, their foremost interest was
in discovering their creative selves and their role in greater society. Real-life
activities, such as field trips, community projects, and professional workshops,
which they themselves often selected and arranged, spurred intrinsic moti-
vation and the desire for intellectual stimulation. Assessment in the Advisory
class documented personal and artistic growth, rather than measuring recall of
predetermined content. Yet faculty members viewed the skills learned, such as
facilitating meetings, organizing activities, drafting speeches, giving presenta-
tions, designing media, publishing articles, building a resume, and writing a
20-page personal narrative as substandard by traditional measures.

The requirement for public education to address state-mandated content
standards affirms particular realities while it excludes others. Further narrowing
the curriculum are college-preparatory courses, which emphasize acquiescence
to the expectations of higher education, and often reduce student creativity and
choice. This had a substantial impact on the Integral Vision of the Arts. While
the IVA science teacher had devoted considerable time to developing activities
to integrate the arts in science, she refused to award college-prep credit (grades
weighted at 1.5) because the course had substituted a number of national
science standards with arts-based projects. This resulted in low enrollment and threatened the course’s continuance. In contrast, those who earned top marks in the IVA Humanities class received weighted credit for their efforts, and the class doubled in size the third year.

As described earlier, initial funding provided professional development in arts integration and career training, but none was allocated towards infusing democratic principles. One may assume that IVA teachers sought to foster an artistic, hands-on dimension for the purpose of increasing enthusiasm for traditional content rather than foster a constructivist approach to curriculum formation. During monthly IVA faculty meetings, the idea of students regularly providing input on classroom instruction never arose, and although it was a program goal stated in the IVA brochure, its practice was confined to the Advisory class. Instead our teamwork was confined to coordinating artist residencies and discussing individual student concerns.

The tension between the arts and academics was exacerbated by the greater freedoms students experienced in the Advisory class. If teens could explore their interests, team together, and above all, dialogue at length on cultural, political, social, educational, and personal issues, how could they refrain from displaying opposition to the teacher-dominated instruction comprising the remaining three-quarters of their day? This unintentional consequence reflected an unforeseen level of student self-advocacy; students transferred their experience in the Advisory to scrutinize other areas of the school, at times embarrassing for those implicated in their critique. Discomfort with this student autonomy, exemplified by Dr. Jones’ memo, may have been felt by other colleagues, though none sought resolution as the principal had. The dichotomy between the safety and freedom of the IVA classroom and the external pressures for academic output and conformance to school conventions had compromised the overall student experience.

Despite the fact that a full year had been devoted to program development and promotion before the opening of IVA, advocacy remained a key function of the directorship. Community support for the Integral Vision of the Arts appeared strong; the local school board easily passed budget increases in arts education and accepted new grant funds toward arts expansion. Yet support within Woodlands High School itself was uncertain. Staff turnover had exacerbated the struggle; not only had the principal who had initiated IVA left, but two guidance counselors and the highly accomplished IVA theater teacher had transferred as well. I found myself without words when asked by an incoming counselor, “Are we really doing what’s best for kids or trying to fill a program?” The tasks of the directorship were total: monitoring student progress, writing budgets and reports, overseeing artist-in-residence programs, and teaching two 80-minute courses daily. Illuminating this issue, the evaluation pointed to strong career academy leadership as an area of both considerable strength in terms of effectiveness and possible concern if unsustainable or irreplaceable.

The relative independence I enjoyed within the larger school system (Blandy, 1987) proved to be short-lived. The belief in democratic pedagogy, which had predominated my preservice training at a progressive college, was not widely accepted among colleagues. In-school advocacy did not appear urgent until
unilateral decisions from Woodlands’ administration surfaced towards the end of the second year. IVA students’ criticism of the larger school system and their refusal to follow rules they opposed, such as carrying a hall pass, remaining in the cafeteria for lunch, and limiting computer use to schoolwork, may have aggravated those at Woodlands who held long-established orderliness in the utmost importance. Although IVA could enjoy fans at the state department and arts organizations, these institutions were powerless to protect the program. In the third year, cutbacks resulted in no renewal of theater funding and, due to space shortages, two general education courses were assigned to the IVA studio, no small intrusion in the eyes of IVA students.

Despite the challenges, IVA students dedicated their energies to making a difference beyond their small circle. Occasional setbacks became obstacles overcome, such as the shared commitment between the principal and the music committee to promote safety at Jubilation. Teachers recognized that change was afoot and that new opportunities for innovation had arrived. The tumult took its course and transformed Woodlands High School beyond IVA’s original design.

For the first 2 years, IVA students executed the community arts festival. After several months of planning, the countdown before the big Friday in May resounded in the Advisory. That week began with artists-in-residence teaching throughout Woodlands High School in both academic and elective classes. As the daily workshops gained momentum through the week, IVA students worked behind the scenes getting ready for the festival. On Friday, they were excused at noon to prepare the bandshell for the jam stage and set up tables and chairs in the field for incoming vendor and activity displays. When school ended at 2 o’clock, 40 student volunteers picked up their staff t-shirts and supplies. Two dozen high school students taught children from the neighborhood child care centers and elementary and middle schools. Their activities included button making, dancing, clay modeling, puppet making, face painting, henna tattooing, mask making, Frisbee, bike tricks, and a pie-eating contest. Thirty businesspeople and artists came to sell their wares. Woodlands’ medieval fighting club staged a tournament; the town electric company gave rides on their cherry picker; and student musicians jammed on stage. As a result of students’ efforts in grant writing and recruiting volunteers, admission and all activities were free. The French class gave away their own freshly baked bread, and a community volunteer provided helium balloons, cotton candy, and turns jumping in an inflatable playhouse. The artists-in-residence and participating students performed to an audience of several hundred, followed by the school drama club’s cabaret and the evening concert, finally coming a close just after 10 pm. The exuberance pouring from IVA students as they led activities, managed events, and performed for the public far outweighed any misgivings I had privately harbored. By the evening’s end of each festival, a wondrous glory had welled up inside the IVA students, which I had previously believed impossible in a public school setting.

In consideration of the Integral Vision of the Arts overall, I believe that its positive impact school-wide and on the lives of its participants outweighed its shortcomings, namely its unconvincing effects on academic performance. In
the current era of acute accountability, the myopic focus on student progress can eclipse the strides made both in students’ personal growth and teachers’ classroom instruction. The Humanities class, where artists regularly collaborated with the teacher team, doubled in size each year, with a second course section added in the fall of 2005. This example convinced additional teachers to request arts-integration funding in all academic areas, plus IVA teachers welcomed visiting artists in their other courses. Every Woodlands student would now work with an artist-in-residence nearly every year of high school. In addition, two new programs began during IVA’s second year, possibly as a result of the evaluation’s recommendation for greater personalization and democratic education to reach the general student population. First, nearly every student was assigned to attend a daily 20-minute teacher-advisory period to incorporate character education into the mainstream of school life. Second, Woodlands’ student council became a credit-bearing class devoted to leadership training and civic engagement. This new course built a platform from which greater student voice could be heard.

When the High School Reform Career Academies Pilot Grant expired after 2 years, the school board allocated local monies to keep the program running, though pricier components such as individual piano and voice lessons were removed. Despite this effort, space shortages at Woodlands and changing district priorities, specifically to meet the escalating expectations of No Child Left Behind, impeded IVA’s momentum. The new direction exposed more students to the arts at the expense of a small artist community that benefited from disproportionate resources. Buy-in among faculty had grown: 11 of Woodlands’ 19 teachers incorporated arts-integration to some extent during IVA’s third year. This was made all the more apparent when a 21st Century Community Learning Centers grant was awarded to provide both after-school arts activities and academic supports for at least the next 3 years—hopefully, sufficient time to make headway in long-term arts sustainability for both curricular and co-curricular programming.

**Conclusion**

Fullan (2001a) poses that school change can only be effective by means of reculturing, wherein individual educators must construct their own meaning over a period of years. He states, “Conflict and disagreement are not only inevitable but fundamental to successful change” (p. 108). The case of IVA affirms this position. Analyzed within the framework of Scott’s (2001) “Three Pillars of Institutions,” administrators and teachers hung onto the cultural-cognitive pillar, consisting of prior “conceptions that constituted the nature of social reality” (p. 57), despite ample normative evidence that defended the career academy innovations. Woodlands’ faculty resisted the two program aspects that had most greatly challenged traditional secondary level education: heterogeneity and student empowerment. The expectation to institutionalize IVA within only two years of implementation, regardless of glowing reports or community support, was not only unfounded, but contrary to the literature on school change (Fullan, 2001a, 2001b). Believing that the director alone could raise student achievement distracted teachers from the fundamental problem of the unwillingness of low-achieving teens to face and ameliorate their deficits.
Consequently, although some elements of the career academy model were compromised over time, particularly the accommodation of the Advisory room for other courses, IVA’s presence had made a substantial impact on the larger school system.

As educational leaders fear that their schools may be identified as “failing” based on standardized assessments, federal, foundational, and private support of the arts has simultaneously declined (Americans for the Arts, 2007; The Foundation Center, 2003). That the test scores of those who struggled most did not improve does not portend that IVA’s objectives should be abandoned. As all interviewed in the evaluation agreed, they may be best channeled into new interdisciplinary pathways for collaboration in the shared goal of engaging more students. Further, the struggle for heterogeneity and teacher discomfort with student democracy, which affect all areas of school life, demands deliberation beyond the career academy to reach multiple constituencies, including administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members (Apple & Beane, 1995; de los Reyes & Gozumba, 2002; Freire, 1993). For educators who have imagined creating a learning environment cultivating youth empowerment and arts education, I offer the following suggestions for establishing a new learning pathway.

One, clarify a philosophy of leadership. Predilection for democracy with students at the center of decision-making must be reconciled with all involved, especially classroom teachers. This requires a “dilution of status” (Dixon, 1998), since adults must relinquish some control in order for students to experience legitimate empowerment. Democracy can be messy and contentious, and has no clear links to improved performance on state assessments; thus commitment to its practice must remain resolute in order to combat ever-encroaching top-down efficiency and instructional standardization.

Two, form an interwoven team that need not rely on a sole individual. Participating faculty members need opportunities to visit one another’s classrooms and team across the disciplines. Students observe both teachers’ tensions and bonds, and may respond more positively when learning expectations bridge character education, service-learning, democratic participation, and academic coursework. Although teachers need not team on every aspect, they can share lesson plans and examples of student work at least twice a month by forming a critical friends group (Costa & Kallik, 1993; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). By devising ways together that address instructional and student issues, teachers and students can grow not only to appreciate one another’s efforts, but to actually incorporate them into their own professional practices.

Three, seek a balance between self-exploration and college preparation. The purpose of a career academy is to expose students to the pinnacles of the profession. For some students, this may deemphasize academic pursuits in favor of community-based learning. The heterogeneous design requires intentional differentiation, not only within the classroom but in post-secondary planning. In addition, guidance counselors especially need to recognize that in order for a vibrant community of learners to take shape, all participating students must share time together. Personal learning plans individuating goals and projects did
not unify IVA; it was the collective vision and work on Jubilation that brought us all together.

Four, partner with community, state, and national organizations that care about the program, especially during the first years of uncertainty. This role must expand beyond the directorship to participating teachers in the shared pursuit of long-term viability. Local field professionals volunteering their expertise, community groups collaborating on program development and grant-writing, and state agencies helping to direct opportunities and resources eliminate the sense of isolation and impossibility that can undermine school change. The thrill for IVA students to spend quality time with talented adults is an invaluable priority to preserve.

Fifth, align goals with national models. In the struggle to maintain integrity in four vital pedagogies, imagination, heterogeneity, democracy, and career preparation, I referenced notable studies on renowned schools to prove its worth. Neither Woodlands administration nor faculty contested the underpinnings of IVA; conflicts were technical and logistical rather than ideological. Nevertheless behind every conversation was the steady drumbeat of No Child Left Behind, threatening public humiliation and punitive mandates if our school failed to make Adequate Yearly Progress. This is a battle now being fought on many fronts, and democracy and the arts have yet to appear on the winning side. Sharing stories of success is as vindicating for an educator as it is a strategy to promote student-centered education.

Finally, commit wholeheartedly to the students. My position as career academy director and teacher-advisor brought a steady stream of exciting opportunities to present, travel, and learn about the world with impressionable young people whose faces shone with a newfound sense of possibility. The collective service-learning pursuit of Jubilation continually inspired us to experiment with new media and technologies, take risks in full public view, and solve problems as avant-garde entrepreneurs. Coaching students along the way has been the most fulfilling endeavor of my career. I could not grant a greater wish to my colleagues in the field.

References


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