



The Arts at Lehigh: A Community of Makers

Arts programs foster a culture of innovation and creativity that contributes to the vitality of campus life

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Perhaps, as Lehigh University Art Galleries (LUAG) Director William Crow believes, “organizations, including universities, really retain the DNA of their founders.”

When he applied for the LUAG position in 2018, Crow researched the history of Lehigh and the Lehigh Valley. The more he learned about the university’s founder Asa Packer, the school’s first president, Henry Coppee, and the surrounding area’s history, he says, “it became really clear to me that this is a place for makers.”

That certainly could help shed light on why Lehigh’s arts programs are thriving even in a time of pandemic and polarization, as increasing numbers of students find a home in a community of makers.

“To be a maker is fundamentally creative. It’s generative,” says Nicholas Sawicki, associate professor and chair of the Department of Art, Architecture and Design. “It’s about producing something that wasn’t there when you started. There’s something very empowering about that. And students are excited by that possibility. It affords them tremendous latitude for innovation, for creativity, for thinking broadly. That resonates with Lehigh students right now, and this is the generation of undergraduates who will be leading the university into the future.”

Sawicki, an art historian by training, has taught in the College of Arts and Sciences since 2009, and became department head in July 2020. He is one of three new chairs in the arts, joining Tong Soon Lee, who came to Lehigh as chair of the music department in 2018, and Kashi Johnson, who became chair of theatre in July 2019.

And in what seems a serendipitous alignment, Lehigh also has new directors at LUAG in Crow, and at Zoellner Arts Center in Mark Wilson.

The five new chairs and directors have been brought together as an informal arts committee by Robert Flowers, Herbert J. and Ann L. Siegel Dean

of the College of Arts and Sciences. The goal, says Lee, is to explore the role of the arts in a liberal arts context, and “how to make liberal arts education relevant and transformative in these changing times.”

The three chairs also have begun discussing among themselves, mainly by Zoom and email, curriculum and collaboration, “trying to explore different ways in which our curriculum can intersect effectively,” Lee says. “Whether that means more cross-listed courses with two or three departments, or whether that means more core teaching or collaborative teaching arrangements, we don’t know yet. We are in the exploratory stages.”

With what Johnson calls the “new cohort of leaders” in place, the process of charting a course to a more dynamic, distinctive, and collaborative future for the arts at Lehigh has begun.

“I can say my department as a whole is very excited about what’s to come. But I mean, the leadership in my department before me was strong. I’m just happy to bear the torch and continue to grow the department in this way. I’ve been entrusted with a lot, and I’m up for the challenge” Johnson says.

Art, Architecture and Design: Finding Meaning and Purpose

As he took over the art, architecture and design department during the pandemic in July 2020, Nicholas Sawicki was confronted with one overarching question: “How do you adapt a form of teaching you’ve spent your life practicing that right now has to be carried out in a very different way?” For example, students taking courses remotely on their computers at home obviously did not have access to the materials and tools they would have had in a workshop or studio on campus.

The innovative answer to that problem came in a box.

The department worked with Blick Art Materials, a large national vendor, “to put together materials kits for many of our studio and architecture and design courses that have within them materials and basic tools that students can use as part of the class to produce their work.” In other cases, faculty prepared supplies themselves and mailed them to students.

“So, there’s been a lot of unboxing, as my daughters would say, of materials in the homes of our students. Each of them at the beginning of the semester received a box loaded with materials and tools and supplies specific to the particular class that they’re taking, and they’re using that to create a kind of parallel experience to the studio in their own homes or in their apartments, if they’re living here off campus in Bethlehem. And that’s been really exciting. I think we’ve found that if you can work out some of the logistical hurdles, you can really provide a robust and engaging educational experience, even in courses that require a lot of intensive hands-on work.”

In courses where it was impossible to replicate or offer a parallel experience remotely, the faculty Sawicki refers to as his “highly adaptable and innovative colleagues” refocused class time on “broader conceptual and theoretical concerns, and on the generation of forms, rather than assembly or production.”



“None of us buys into the widely circulated idea that we’ve been hearing in the national media over the past several months that remote education is a diminished education,” he says. “We do not believe that that’s what we or other departments are offering. What we’re offering is simply a different platform for instruction.”

Another common myth is that a liberal arts education — and the arts in particular — does not provide a path forward for students. “We are working very aggressively to give them the tools they need to move out ahead either to graduate school or professional practice,” Sawicki says.

And students certainly do not believe the myth. “Our enrollments this semester are up almost 20 percent from where they were last fall,” he says. “I don’t know if that’s a blip, but it’s certainly not a sign that in this new environment the arts are any less important. If anything, it’s a sign of the opposite.”

“What I see on the ground, first teaching in the department and now as chair, is that College of Arts and Sciences students are driven first of all by the desire to find meaning and a sense of purpose in all that they do,” he says. “It’s what motivates their choices, their decisions, about what to study and what to pursue after they graduate, as well as their desire to create and to design — to be a maker — which is itself a core process that is full of meaning and purpose. And I think that’s why Lehigh students are so attracted to the arts. I think that’s what our department does well. We provide a structured, exploratory space in which you can find meaning and find purpose through making. I think that’s part of our role in the university and the College of Arts and Sciences.”

Music: Listening and Learning

In almost all the classes he teaches, Tong Soon Lee introduces his students to Korean percussion and Javanese gamelan music, which features a set of gong chimes that produce five or seven different tones. What they learn has every bit as much to do with life as music.

One person playing a single gong is fairly easy. But when eight to 10 students must play different instruments together, the resulting cacophony makes them quickly realize how difficult it is.

“There’s no notation. You have to listen to people,” says Lee, a professor, scholar, and ethnomusicologist in addition to department chair. “And the thing I always remind them is that in order to play well, you have to know your role — the role that you play in the entire ensemble band. And within 20-30 minutes, they find themselves making music with each other. It actually works — once you start listening to each other.”

An accomplished pianist and someone with no experience playing a musical instrument find themselves on equal footing.

“This sort of music can be very egalitarian,” Lee says. “It doesn’t exclude anyone. You may know a lot about music, you may not know anything about music, but you sit together. There’s no hierarchy there, there’s no advantages or disadvantages. You learn together and you listen together and you can make it together.”

Lee is exploring how to make the Department of Music more egalitarian, more open to students

whose interests may not necessarily include being part of one of Lehigh’s performance ensembles.

“I think we have done very well in providing music opportunities for Lehigh students,” Lee says. “That is a strength of Lehigh. That’s what attracts students here. And I think our music department has done extremely well in building up opportunities, but more importantly pedagogical quality and artistic performance standards out of these ensembles.”

“I think we can continue to draw on the strength that we have developed in the past 40 years and build on it. To balance it with the scholarship side, the academic side, so that we can play a more integral and a more central role in enhancing liberal arts education in the college and the university.”

Lee is interested in not only collaborating with the other arts departments on curriculum, but also potentially with colleagues in the humanities, the social sciences, the natural sciences, or engineering.

“I would say that the focus then would be on training students through music on how to think critically and how to be able to apply such critical skills and make them transferable to the other subjects or other areas of studies that they are engaged in,” Lee says.

At the same time, Lee is also looking to make parts of the music curriculum less restrictive. The traditional curriculum for pathways such as performance or music composition are “very specific and very structured” in terms of what courses are required.

“So, what about a student who wants to conduct a jazz ensemble or play in a jazz ensemble, but compose jazz music? How can we accommodate these students?” Lee asks.

The whole department has been working on revising the curriculum for the past three years.

“We have to focus on strengths. But to the extent that we can broaden our curriculum such that a diverse group of students — with different upbringing, with different musical background or knowledge — can come in and find a place for themselves and say, ‘Hey, I can also do a B.A. in music. It could be a double major, which is wonderful.’ And that’s the goal of our new curriculum, that it provides that room without lowering, without minimizing, the rigor of the musical training.”

Theatre: Shining Light on a ‘Hidden Gem’

Kashi Johnson was a computer science engineering major when she first set foot on Lehigh’s campus as a student in the late 1980s. She graduated in 1993 as a theatre major.

“Lehigh is where I fell in love with theatre,” Johnson says.

After earning her Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Pittsburgh, Johnson returned to her alma mater in 1999 as a visiting professor, and the following year, was hired as a 28-year-old faculty member. Her appointment as chair of the department in 2019 represented a truly noteworthy achievement in a field where Black women comprise just 3 percent of all full-time faculty nationwide, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

“There aren’t many Black women who are academic chairs in the country right now, much less heading up a theatre program,” Johnson says. “I am a testament to

the dedication the Department of Theatre has had for a very long time to diversity. They didn't just talk the talk, but walked the walk of retaining and promoting underrepresented faculty through the ranks."

As the nation was faced with what Johnson calls "the twin pandemics of systemic racism and COVID-19" in 2020, the theatre department strengthened and focused its commitment to diversity.

"I'm proud of my department because we continue to do the work that we've been doing and not having to use this moment to reassess or re-evaluate," Johnson says. "If anything, we're doubling down now. We're trying to bring in more voices that we have always wanted to engage. We're using theatre to meet, head on, the call for justice, the call for conversation, the call for self-reflection. And the call for coming together in a safe place where we can hopefully change a little bit and become better. There's a lot that theatre can do to heal and to foster and bridge new levels of understanding."

With live performances not an option during the pandemic, the department renamed what has become a virtual theatre season: Reboot the Future.

"Due to the pandemic, we have been afforded the unique opportunity to explore and examine

"We provide a structured, exploratory space in which you can find meaning and find purpose through making."

what it means to make theatre in the face of social distancing." Johnson says. "Together, our students, faculty and staff have come up with an exciting new virtual season full of challenge and possibility. We're really looking for ways to innovate."

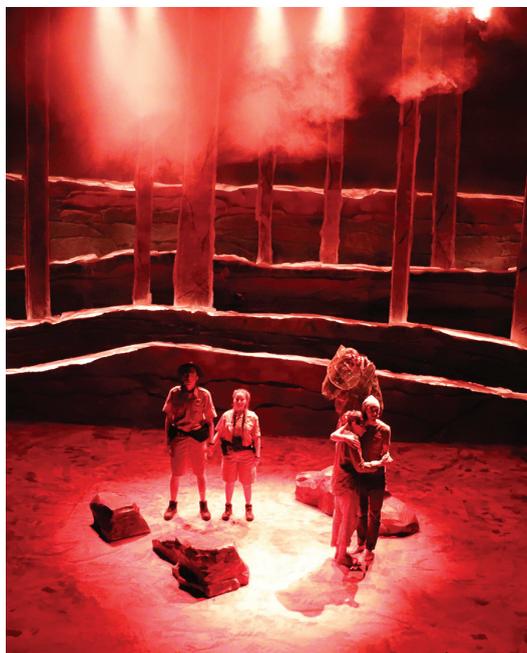
Johnson also believes that collaboration among the arts departments and venues is key to raising the profile of the arts at Lehigh as well as in the surrounding community and online. Johnson has long felt that the arts at Lehigh are "a hidden gem" about which too many students are unaware.

"Together, we are stronger and the arts are more powerful when they're reflecting and vibrating together," she says. "It's great that we're using this time to get to know each other and building an alliance rooted in allyship. I've been here for 20 years and there have been times when collaboration seemed to be in name only. Projects were siloed and unique to a particular department or program. Today, we are a collection of new faces representative of new opportunities, reaching beyond boundaries set in the past. It's truly exciting.

Lehigh University Art Galleries: 'Making Museums Matter'

Some people look at museums as "dusty warehouses of the past." William Crow sees them as "places of possibility."

Since arriving at LUAG from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in August 2018, Crow has begun realizing the boundless possibilities that open by engaging





students, faculty and staff, the Lehigh Valley community, and the broader world connected to the university through the internet. You can glimpse the future of LUAG in what is happening in the art galleries now.

“We’ve grown our attendance by 86 percent, which is unheard of in a museum field, and I think it really speaks to the amount of interest and enthusiasm that there is at Lehigh and in the local community for the arts and what we’re doing,” says Crow, who also serves as professor of practice in the Department of Art, Architecture and Design. “I think people are really

At the time, the only other location internationally it could be viewed was Italy’s Venice Biennale.

The sisters “work together and with local communities to crochet these enormous and sprawling coral reef structures that are both sculpture and also a visual manifestation addressing issues of climate change, as well as collective impact and collaborative meaning-making,” Crow says.

The exhibition also involved other Lehigh departments, including earth and environmental sciences, biology, mathematics, and gender studies, as well as local community

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hungry to make authentic connections with things that people have created and the ways in which artists have solved problems and challenges in the past. And so, I’m really excited about that and I think that also points to what the future may hold for the art galleries. With that type of substantial growth, I think the sky’s the limit.”

Crow started by prioritizing the museum’s educational work and public programming, hiring Stacie Brennan as its first curator of education. In 2019, LUAG brought to Lehigh the acclaimed science-art exhibition “Crochet Coral Reef,” a project by Australian-born twin sisters Margaret Wertheim, a mathematician and scientist, and Christine Wertheim, a visual artist, and their Los Angeles-based Institute For Figuring.

partners, including a local knitting and crochet store that came in on a weekly basis to facilitate drop-in workshops.

Another key priority is ensuring that the voices of students are heard in the museum’s work, and that opportunities abound to “help shape the next generation of museum leaders,” says Crow, who also is directing efforts to rebuild the museum studies minor in art, architecture and design. “And we won’t be able to do that if students are on the sidelines or passively watching. Students should learn, and lead, by doing.”

An exhibition of photos from the collection of ABC News chief anchor and former Clinton White House advisor George Stephanopoulos titled “Doing Democracy,” which is currently at the LUAG Main



Gallery at Zoellner Arts Center through May 21, 2021, has had considerable student involvement. The exhibit was co-curated by students and faculty from the history, political science, journalism and communication, and art, architecture and design departments.

Additionally, Lehigh students recorded an audio guide to an outdoor exhibition featuring 4-foot by 8-foot billboard reproductions of 22 of the photographs placed along a 1.9-mile stretch of the South Bethlehem Greenway, in partnership with the SouthSide Arts District.

The voices of Lehigh students can also literally be heard on a new audio guide to the university's renowned outdoor sculpture collection. A group of 25 students worked to create the guide to the 56 outdoor sculptures on Lehigh campuses.

Before the pandemic drove most people indoors and online, LUAG redesigned its website to bring it in line with the Lehigh brand and increase visibility, and is in the process of digitizing its collection of almost 17,000 works of art. About 2,500 works have already been digitized and are available for public viewing on LUAG's website. LUAG has received a second federal grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services to digitize the rest of its collection, with some of the money earmarked to fund training for Lehigh students to do the digitization.

"We're trying to make museums matter," Crow says. "We want museums to be places of possibility and we want everyone to feel like they belong and to take ownership in the museum. So, we're really working actively to make sure that happens."

Zoellner Arts Center: 'What We Have in Common'

In his previous position as executive director of cultural programs and partnerships at Grunin Center for the Arts in Tom's River, N.J., Mark Fitzgerald Wilson developed an understanding of "how to connect the arts and technology together."

Wilson arrived at Lehigh in August 2020 as the new executive director of Zoellner Arts Center during the pandemic that shifted so much of education—and almost everything else—from the in-person world to the digital realm. And connecting arts and technology will play a role as he seeks to prioritize accessibility and diversity to better serve the university and the local community.

"Moving forward in the arts, I think people are going to have a thirst to come back together," Wilson says. "And I think we now know that we can do some things with technology to continue to keep the arts thriving. So for my staff, I ask them what are things that we are doing that we want to continue to do to connect our community with the arts? Can we use this technology to answer this accessibility question for people in our community who do not have accessibility to arts as much as they need? I think that's the thing we can start to do is to take a step back and figure out if this could be a way for us to now get to the people on the margins and get them more involved or figure out more solutions to that question."

Technology also can help break down barriers. One idea Wilson is considering is using technology to bring together suburban and urban students, or rural and urban students. "Could we use our technology to have a shared experience with the students? Would they talk to each other about the performance that they saw and what they learned together using technology?"

Aside from technology, Wilson also would like to explore ways to bring performances and events more directly to the community.

"I would say that the bigger vision would be for us to open the arts outside of just the four walls of our theater, but actually partner with student groups and community groups to bring the arts across the campus and across the community and not be moored by us just having performances inside a building," he says.

Wilson says Zoellner will continue bringing in the popular, traditional shows—world-class orchestras and dance companies, contemporary adult performers like Smokey Robinson, and Broadway shows—while striving to provide performances and events to connect to different cultures among Lehigh students and the community.

For example, he thinks Zoellner could help support student cultural clubs "by letting them see their voice on the stage and let them interact with artists and give them an opportunity to experience their culture and share that out with the greater community also. So I think it's about diversity, equity and inclusion, and getting the community to see different cultures."

It all comes down to the important role that the arts can—and should—play during this time when so many are focused on the things that divide us.

"I think the arts can be a way to bring people together to see what we actually have in common," Wilson says. ●

