Emerging Creatives: a Report on a2ru’s Inaugural Student Conference

Greetings,

Thank you for your support and your students’ participation in the Alliance for the Arts in Research Universities’ (a2ru) inaugural student conference – January 30 through February 1, 2014 – hosted at Stanford University. A summary of the conference’s goals and results is below, as well as a discussion of the activities and work in which your students engaged.

a2ru unifies and focuses the network of academic leaders and practitioners at the nexus of the Arts, Engineering, Computer Science, Design and a great variety of other fields. Crafting our student conference to match that reality was a natural extension. As such, the a2ru Emerging Creatives Student Conference aimed to engage students of all disciplines interested in crossing creative boundaries and actualizing collaborative projects. As a convocation of students from a2ru partner universities across the country, a2ru’s inaugural student conference provided attendees specific tools for interdisciplinary creative collaboration as well as access to similarly-minded peers and experts, enabling this group of emerging creatives to develop, execute and sustain new interdisciplinary collaborative endeavors. Our expected student outcomes included:

- Developing a national network of interdisciplinary colleagues and future collaborators
- Learning from scholars, artists and entrepreneurs about ongoing research, successful projects and lessons learned related to interdisciplinary collaborative endeavors
- Attaining specific strategies for interdisciplinary collaboration, communication and mobilizing failure to push ideas and projects forward through collective creative processes

Emerging Creatives General Student Demographics

a2ru constructed this conference to begin actively training and unifying a generation of thinkers and creators that identify as a singular community capable of actualizing endeavors much larger than themselves. Attendees were approximately 50% undergraduates and 50% graduate students either in Master’s or Ph.D. programs, and the male/female ratio of the applicant pool and the attendees selected was virtually equal.

Two features of the student attendees selected were also distinct: virtually no attendee pursues a single discipline (this is true even of graduate students), and these mixtures of seemingly disparate fields fit together very naturally in students’ worldviews. Both of these features were on display at the conference. Students selected represent a broad range of fields/disciplines, including:

- Bioinformatics
- Digital Humanities
- Visual Arts
- Information Sciences
- Computer Science
- Performing Arts
- Linguistics
- New Media
- Robotics
- Architecture
- Engineering
- Design
- Statistics
- Developmental Psychology
- Game Studies
- Human-Computer Interaction
- Theatre
- Mathematics
- Ecology
- Journalism
- A Great Wealth of Other Fields
Students from 25 of the 28 a2ru Partner Institutions were present, including:

- Arizona State University
- Carnegie Mellon University
- Dartmouth College
- Iowa State University
- James Madison University
- Johns Hopkins University
- Louisiana State University
- MIT
- Penn State
- Stanford University
- Tufts University
- University of Alabama
- University of Alabama-Birmingham
- University of Colorado at Boulder
- University of Florida
- University of Illinois—Urbana-Champaign
- University of Iowa
- University of Maryland
- University of Michigan
- University of Southern California
- University of Utah
- University of Virginia
- Virginia Commonwealth University
- Virginia Tech
- Washington University in St. Louis

**Primary Conference Experiences and Opportunities**

1) **Underdefined Challenges:**
While applying for the a2ru Emerging Creatives Student Conference students were asked to rank their motivations for engaging in creative, interdisciplinary work from across and within the arts and technological/scientific fields. The provided motivational options for making and pursuing interdisciplinary creative collaboration were:

- “Arts and Hacks:” students interested in trouble-making and tinkering
- “Winner’s Circle:” students with entrepreneurial interests
- “Wayfinders:” students with general problem-solving inquisitiveness
- “Odyssey:” students with personal and professional growth in mind
- “Social Justice:” students pursuing creative solutions to inequity in local or global contexts

Breaking the larger group of attendees into these groups based on motivation was a method employed to:
- Maximize student engagement while attending the conference;
- To leverage lasting relationships across the a2ru student base; and
- To increase the likelihood of value adhering to affect long-term impact on students’ home campuses. Students were split into these groups early for facilitated discussions with one another and leaders/faculty from the a2ru partnership base. Students were tasked to address a relevant problem or limitation of expression within the context of their motivation for creating, assemble working teams within their break out groups to attack the problem, and present their projects at the end of the conference.

We are happy to report that your students truly rose to the occasion; whether expressive, societal or “utilitarian” in nature, students demonstrated extremely high levels of sophistication in both problem solving and problem finding. A few examples of student work include:

- **MicroMorts App:** a fully operational App that took a comedic approach to our daily encounters with the taboo subject of our own mortality. The App measured one’s “MicroMorts” for the day based on weighted questions that they developed. MicroMorts, or one’s 1 in 1 Million likelihood of dying based on a particular activity or habit an individual engages in or espouses, shifts the likelihood and, consequently, impacts one’s “score.” Seeing a bee, hang-gliding, smoking, or operating a motor vehicle impact your score for the day
• **Audience/Performers and Social Justice:** a new performance methodology that directly engages audience response into the performance itself, changing the nature of the performer/audience binary for the purposes of societal change

• **Aspire Airlines:** the development of a new airline experience, shifting the passenger experience and business travel from that of a “prison in the sky” to a collaborative work atmosphere made affordable through local partnerships and corporate sponsorships

2) **d.school “Bootcamp”:**
One of the opportunities afforded our a2ru students was a “bootcamp” in design thinking provided by the prestigious Hasso Plattner School of Design at Stanford University. Led by Bill Burnett, Mechanical Engineer and Executive Director of the Design Program, students learned techniques, tools and specific skills for furthering collaborative and creative initiatives. Students gained first-hand exposure to, and practice in, methods to conceive of and further their own individual projects as well as the projects in which they engaged during the conference. Both students and faculty reported to a2ru leadership that the skills and techniques learned from the d.school’s lengthy bootcamp will stick with them individually and will be something they share and practice on their home campuses.

3) **Expert Panel and Conversations with Leaders:**
Students participated in a panel and conversation with leaders that work in the “third space” between art and technology/science in academia, industry and philanthropy:

- Ivica Ico Bukvic: Intermedia Composer and Associate Professor in Music Technology at Virginia Tech
- Elaine Martyn: Vice President of Development for the Global Fund for Women
- Bill Sherman: Founding Director of OpenGrounds, Professor of Architecture and Associate Vice President for Research at University of Virginia
- Srinija Srinivasan: Co-Founder of The Loove and Former Vice President of Yahoo! Inc.

These four guests were put in conversation with each other to unpack failure experiences, challenges to and successes in interdisciplinary collaborative work in their varying worlds. This proved to be a very successful model as the conversation lead to specific overlaps and points of divergence from one arena of application to the other. The already informal discussion on mobilizing failure to grow success and interdisciplinary collaboration in creative contexts quickly evolved to respond to students, all of whom asked probing, intelligent questions that drew extremely useful responses from our panelists.

This panel/conversation was just one formalized aspect of a larger element of the conference: the expectation placed on students to engage leadership from the a2ru base and beyond, and the expectation placed on leadership from the a2ru base to engage students from across the nation. Time was allotted specifically for such interactions to occur in formal contexts and in individual conversations, yielding several benefits: students learned from a greater variety of faculty/leaders and attain new perspectives on their own training and thinking; leaders/faculty engaged students from the entirety of the a2ru network and heard about work occurring on peer campuses; and the a2ru network broke the barrier between faculty/leaders and the students we serve.

### Student Responses to the Conference
Several measures of student response to the a2ru Emerging Creatives Student Conference were employed. Beyond the above conversations and amazing work in which your students engaged, a2ru staff:
• Designed and implemented a survey to gain student feedback about the conference as well as the opportunities on partner campuses for such training/engagement
• Collected a great deal of photographic and videographic evidence
• Gathered testimonials of individual student experiences

The quantitative findings from the survey showed uniform high levels of satisfaction with the conference overall, as well as with the individual opportunities and features described above. These findings are matched by a great number of statements from students’ testimonials and written responses. Two such statements are provided below:

• “I have a feeling the ramifications for my own personal work will linger long after the conference is over – it’s already started. So thank you for that – there were so many amazing and talented and interesting people there” – Michael Spory, Iowa State
• “I learned a ton and met some incredible people that I hope to stay in touch with. There were times that I felt like I found my ‘tribe’ – people who didn’t even blink when I listed computer science, music and developmental psychology as my fields of study” – Dylan Portelance, Tufts University
• “That was an absolutely magical experience!” – Josh Gigantino, Arizona State University

**Immediate Impacts**

• The photographs, video, qualitative and other feedback captured will be made available to all participating partner universities; each of your institutions has a designated a2ru “Partner Content Curator” to whom this information will be made available in a “Press Packet” format. We encourage your Departments, Colleges and Universities to mobilize the footage as a means to highlight the excellent work your students have begun
• Without any particular guidance or suggestion from a2ru staff, your students from different fields and parts of the country formed an a2ru Student Committee, and will engage with each other and the organization through that conduit
• A section of a2ru’s website called the “Sandbox” now houses the working groups’ projects and discussions around them. Students from each working group will be able to use this space to continue their interdisciplinary collaborations
• Some of the students that attended the Emerging Creatives Student Conference intend to turn their projects into prototypes and, eventually, products for the market. The same is true for those that created for artistic purposes and will continue to their work for an installation or performance
• Students that attended the Emerging Creatives Student Conference can immediately apply lessons from this conference to their own work as well as influence their peers and their larger campus community

Thank you again for your leadership and commitment to a2ru. We look forward to achieving our shared vision through continued work together, and are grateful to your students for their enthusiasm, insights, and continued engagement with a2ru.

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