

**Aspire Campaign Priorities:
Exploration in the Arts**

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The Aspire campaign grew out of many conversations that really date back to the day that I became president, almost seven years ago now. I was very careful in the beginning to resist the temptation to declare that I had a vision for Princeton. I thought in order for that vision to have any meaning, I was going to have to incorporate the aspirations of our students, of our faculty, of our alumni, the wisdom of our trustees. All of those needed to have a voice if we were, in fact, going to have a vision for Princeton that would be enduring.

As a consequence, I began with a “walking-around” campaign, if you want to think about it that way, and spent at least a couple of years having those conversations, understanding the strengths of this University, which are substantial, as well as some of the areas where the University needed to strengthen itself and become better. And there were some areas where we simply had to make investments in the future, in fields that didn’t exist 10 years ago, for example, and the campaign agenda really grows out of all of those conversations. Now what did I hear in this “walking-around” campaign? What were some of the themes that came through? And I want to tell you about a number of them because they are now very important parts of the Aspire campaign.

The first thing I want to tell you about are the conversations that circled around the creative and the performing arts. That was one of the first themes that actually came through on my “walking tour,” and I heard it loud and clear from students, I heard it loud and clear from faculty, and I heard it from recent graduates of the University. And what I

heard was that Princeton's programs in the creative and the performing arts, although excellent, and although wonderful experiences for the students who could take advantage of them, were simply not meeting the needs of 21st century students. I was hearing from the admission department, for example, that there were many students applying to Princeton today with stellar academic records, but also clearly looking for an opportunity to combine their studies with opportunities to explore the creative and the performing arts, not only as an extracurricular activity, which of course many of our students do, but in the classroom as part of their rigorous academic program.

I was hearing from faculty that the time of thinking about the study of art, as distinct from the doing of art, had long passed, and that Princeton's curriculum needed to think much more seriously about how to integrate the faculty on our campus who were engaged in studying works of art, which historically of course we had always done in departments like art and archaeology and music. They were looking for an environment here at Princeton where there were working artists—working artists who were doing art, but also teaching our students art. And as I began to look into this further, what I began to hear were stories about students who had applied eight times to in Emmet Gowin's photography class and had yet to be accepted because there were so few places in a class that clearly requires an intense engagement of the faculty with each and every student's project.

So the question then became, not so much, "Is this an important thing to do for Princeton?"—that seemed very clear from what I was hearing. The question then became how to do it. And I asked a group of faculty to spend a year thinking hard about how to do this, and their vision for the creative and the performing arts was articulated in

a report that they wrote for me, and it led to the creation of the Lewis Center for the Arts, made possible through the enormous generosity of Peter Lewis, of the great class of 1955.

So what is that vision? The vision is really to integrate the doing of art into the Princeton curriculum, in a way where it will be accessible not just to the students on our campus—and there are some who clearly aspire to become working artists—but also accessible to students who, perhaps for historical reasons, have had no access to the arts in their childhood and come to Princeton with a thirst for experiencing acting, or dancing, or painting, or creative writing, or singing, playing a musical instrument. The decision was taken to make this a very undergraduate-focused program, and a program in which we would expand the opportunities in the curriculum for our students to engage in the arts, we would support more fulsomely the extracurricular activities of our students that are expanding at a rapid rate, and to bring a group of artists to campus to be both exemplars of the creative and the performing arts, but also the teachers of our students. And we imagined those as both very distinguished artists—this year we have had Edward Albee as our playwright in residence—but we also imagine some fraction of them being aspiring young artists, artists for whom three years as a fellow at Princeton could be the difference between being able to really create a career for themselves in the arts and having to go off and do something else with their lives. We are very excited about the Lewis Center. It is up. It is running. It is led by Paul Muldoon, our marvelous Pulitzer Prize-winning Irish poet. And it is increasing opportunities for all of our students to encounter the arts as an important part of a liberal arts education.