

The Inaugural Address of David P. Nelson  
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Massachusetts College of Art and Design exists because imaginative people conceived a world where MassArt mattered. They built a school where students from diverse backgrounds come together to imagine a world so they can then create it. As the heirs of their legacy, it is now ours to imagine what our world may yet become.

MassArt was founded as Massachusetts Normal Art School in 1873 in fulfillment of the Massachusetts Drawing Act of 1870. The Commonwealth, in response to the Industrial Revolution, recognized the need for citizens to be equipped with technical drawing skills in order to contribute to what today we call the innovation economy.

MassArt's first president, Walter Smith, insisted that students be enrolled not to "make drawings" but rather "to know how to draw." The great reason for the practice of drawing, he believed, is that drawing "makes ignorance visible." The act of drawing allows us to critique our own perceptions. Our drawings "give evidence that we either think rightly or wrongly, or even do not think at all."<sup>1</sup> As we learn better to draw, we learn better to see.

Smith knew that art and design provide ways of improving our thinking and seeing beyond what we've seen before. The school's founders were wise enough to recognize that the best industrial drawers and designers would need to be trained not just by technical experts but by fine artists. To see beyond what had been done before, they needed to hone not just their technical skills but their imaginative skills. By keenly seeing the world as it is, artists and designers would be better equipped to imagine the world as it could be.

What began as Massachusetts Normal Art School has evolved over the nearly 145 years of its existence. The growth of the school – its curricula, its enrollment, its reach – has been marked by several relocations of the campus and several name changes over many decades. Beginning in an attic at 33 Pemberton Square (the current location of the Suffolk County Courthouse), the school in its early decades subsequently occupied spaces on School Street, Washington Street, and Newbury Street before taking up residence at the corner of Longwood and Brookline Avenues in 1929. (The MassArt façade remains to this day on that building, now occupied by Beth Israel Hospital.) The college moved here, to our current Huntington Avenue home, in the environs of the old Boston State College and Boston Latin Girls School, in the 1980s. What began as Massachusetts Normal Art School became

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<sup>1</sup> Mary-Lou Breitbourde & Kelly Kolodny, eds., *Remembering Massachusetts State Normal Schools: Pioneers in Teacher Education* (Institute for Massachusetts Studies, 2014), 84.

Massachusetts School of Art in 1929, Massachusetts College of Art in 1959, and Massachusetts College of Art and Design in 2007.

The school was from its beginning remarkable in many respects, not least of which is its existence as a public institution, founded for the common good. The founders were visionary with respect to including the same curricula for all, regardless of gender. And while some questioned how a school open to the general public could truly be excellent, since it was believed by some that only a few in society had the talent required for such artistic training, the founders of our school saw beyond preconceptions and prejudices and created an institution accessible to the masses.

MassArt was, and is, and will remain the people's college. We are the art and design college of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. That history is remarkable and notable. The implications are significant. Truly significant.

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As I said at the outset, MassArt exists because imaginative people conceived a world where MassArt mattered. They built a school where students from diverse backgrounds come together to imagine a world so they can then create it. Today, as the beneficiaries and heirs of their legacy, I invite you to join me in that exercise that precedes drawing, the exercise of seeing. As we see, I hope we can imagine what may be.

Imagination is the capacity to see what is not immediately present to our senses. It is a fundamental human capacity. We see it in children, and it remains active in brilliant minds like that of Albert Einstein, who told the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1929, "I am enough of the artist to draw freely upon my imagination. Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world."<sup>2</sup>

Imagination is how we solve *big* problems. Imagination is how we see things *differently* – because knowledge is limited, but imagination encircles the world. Imagination offers us ways of seeing the world, and seeing ourselves, and seeing others. It offers us ways of seeing our place in the world, and how the world that isn't may actually come to be. Imagination allows us not just to see, but to *see beyond*.

In these moments together, my hope is that we will see beyond a goods economy to a good economy, that we will see beyond what is to what can be, and that we will see beyond dollars to the rich dividends of better lives and a better world.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2010/03/20/history/post-perspective/imagination-important-knowledge.html>

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Were we walking eastward up Huntington Avenue, in about half an hour we would reach Copley Square. Looking west from the Square, we would behold the Boston Public Library, that grand “palace for the people” as it was called when it opened in 1895. And along the Library’s Boylston Street façade, we would see etched in stone this grand statement: “THE COMMONWEALTH REQUIRES THE EDUCATION OF THE PEOPLE AS THE SAFEGUARD OF ORDER AND LIBERTY.”

Public education was instituted for order and liberty. Today we hear much about the value of education in terms of yielding certain jobs with certain pay. It isn’t uncommon for me to be asked about the number of our graduates employed within a year of completing their degrees and about the earnings of our alums five years after graduation. That is one of account of education, I suppose. I want to offer a more compelling account, a far richer view of education, one that resonates with our forebears who built that library, who etched that inscription, and who built this school. To be sure, some then, like now, view things in terms of consumption and production, in view of profit and loss, counting returns in dollars and cents. But I think we know better than that. I think we *are* better than that. We can *see beyond* a goods economy to a good economy.

The arts tap into the kinds of human ingenuity and creativity that can never be reduced to a production/consumption model. The music of Billie Holliday doesn’t move our balance sheet – it moves our spirits. We don’t stand before Rembrandt’s *Jewish Bride* because it is worth a lot of money – but because it is worth our attention. The architecture of Edward Larrabee Barnes at Haystack isn’t the easiest way to maximize profits – it’s the way to maximize human experience within that place.

An arts education isn’t the least expensive kind of education. It costs money. So does science education, as does something like athletics. We don’t educate our children because it’s inexpensive to do so. We educate our children because it is good to do so. Nor do we educate our children primarily for financial outcomes. We all want our children to make a good living, but we also want them to live a good life.

You can’t put a dollar value on teaching a student to draw, when by that education, she learns not only to draw but to see the world. That “output” isn’t measured by career earnings five years after graduation. It’s more aptly measured by quality of life. It’s more aptly measured in the way she relates to people and the good she may accomplish because at some age, a teacher taught her how to look at the world, to see the world, and to interact with the world around her. The value of our third graders learning how to play the violin or to design their way to solutions will never be fully captured in monetary metrics.

Somewhere along the way, we as a nation have misunderstood the word “economy” to mean merely our financial situation. After the Great Depression, when something

really bad was happening financially, people were struggling to articulate what it was. Simon Kuznets developed a number, the “Gross Domestic Product.”<sup>3</sup> It was a way of adding up everything that gets made in a country in a given year. The measurement was very complicated, but for the first time, it was quantifiable. It became a shorthand way of saying “we’re doing better financially” or “we’re doing worse financially.” GDP as a concept took off. Every country started measuring GDP. The World Bank started ranking countries by GDP.

But by 1968, Robert Kennedy felt the need to remind everyone that for whatever GDP does measure, it doesn’t measure what’s good about a country:

The gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, it measures everything in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.<sup>4</sup>

GDP is a really useful number to have. It collapses all the complications of a nation’s financial system into one single number. But even Kuznets, after winning a Nobel Prize, was afraid of how this number had become a fetish. He believed it was being coopted as an easy way out of hard conversations. GDP, for instance, goes up after natural disasters, like a hurricane. Repair means more productivity. It can likewise go up after human disasters, like war. During WWII, American productivity soared. Bad situation, good GDP.

You see, a good economy isn’t only about the financial bottom line. The term “economy” comes from an ancient Greek word, *oikonomia*, which is essentially a way of organizing our household. A good *oikonomia*, if you will, seeks to steward all available resources in order to maximize not just profits or productivity, but to maximize good.

When I say ‘economy,’ then, I’m not talking about a goods economy. I’m talking about a good economy. A goods economy is all about producing and consuming. A goods economy is about paychecks and profits. A goods economy is measured in dollars and cents. But a good economy is measured, as Robert Kennedy put it, in

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<sup>3</sup> For a short and interesting primer, listen to Jacob Goldstein with David Kestenbaum in *Planet Money* Podcast Episode 522: *The Invention of ‘The Economy,’* (run time 17:19): <http://www.npr.org/sections/money/2017/03/15/520294083/episode-522-the-invention-of-the-economy>

<sup>4</sup> Robert F. Kennedy, remarks at the University of Kansas, March 18, 1968. Available online at [www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Remarks-of-Robert-F-Kennedy-at-the-University-of-Kansas-March-18-1968.aspx](http://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Remarks-of-Robert-F-Kennedy-at-the-University-of-Kansas-March-18-1968.aspx)

health, quality, joy, beauty, strength, intelligence, integrity, wit, courage, wisdom, learning, and compassion.

In real life, the financial bottom line is not *the* bottom line. When people ask us how we're doing, we don't generally answer with our bank account balance. That would be one way of calculating, but there are other ways of calculating what's happening in our lives that are really where we draw the line. *Good* is about having not just our finances but everything in proper order.

We can steward our household so we have maximum profit to spare, and everyone inside may be miserable. Or we can refuse to be satisfied with that model. We can account for our household, we can account for our university, in such a way that we value all the resources we have and maximize not just profit but wellbeing.

*When we reduce everything to the financial, we devalue the things that matter most.* Goods are ephemeral. If we make the goods economy the final measure of things, we ask too little of ourselves. To shift our focus toward a good economy is to invest our resources in those things that are not ephemeral but enduring. Many of us don't need "more goods," but we could all use some more good.

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MassArt is all about creating more good. We can see how things are, but we are not content to leave them that way. We strive to *see beyond* what is to what can be.

You are in the midst of a college that is a giant maker space. Here we have no *department* of experiential learning. Every class – from fine arts to design to art education to history of art to liberal arts – is an instance of hands on experience with depth of learning and scholarship as quality as any institution you'll find. Students aren't simply here sitting at desks and playing with theories and abstractions. We have desks, we learn theories, we deal in abstraction – and we imagine, and we make big messes, and we conduct biological research, and we create. That's why students come to MassArt.

Look above you, see the glass. That's imagination at work. A group of undergraduate students worked with Visiting Artist Dan Clayman to imagine what might fill part of this new space, and a flat ceiling became a glass rain field. They imagined, designed, fashioned, engineered, and installed this exhibit of 10,000 glass raindrops. From conception to completion – which included students obtaining certification to operate a lift – these students are just one example of many of the imaginative, creative, talented artists who do extraordinary work day after day at MassArt.

I tell people that at MassArt creativity is around every corner. It truly is. It is above you – literally – and it is all around you. Just behind you, is the Doran Gallery, where the exhibit *Off Hours* just opened. There you will find the truly remarkable work of staff members – yes staff members of all kinds. By day they do the work of

administration to ensure the faculty and students have what they need to do their work. After hours many of them carry on their own practices in art and design. And it's just a short walk from here to the Paine Gallery, where you will see *Selections* of the impressive work of our new faculty as well as those returning from sabbatical.

Then there are MassArt alums. You have already seen and heard from some in the ceremony today. You see the artistry of some of them all around this room as you look at the brilliant textile work done by former students hanging behind me and on the opposite wall. Of the tens of thousands of alums, some are names many of you will readily recognize, and others have done work you enjoy, even if you don't know their names or their connection to MassArt. And there are thousands whose names or work you may not know or see, but who nevertheless have done their work in such a way that they make the world more like the place we all want to live.

Among our alums are professionals in companies like Apple, Converse, Fidelity, and Lego. They've created businesses in Boston and New York and San Francisco and Miami, and in Somerville and Worcester and Waltham. They work in photography and ad agencies and design firms and in architecture and fashion and television and film. They animate and they illustrate – and they legislate, like our own Rep. Mary Keefe. They research and they teach. They paint and they sculpt. They design and they make.

Among our alums are entrepreneurs like Caitlin Jewell who delights our palates at the Somerville Brewing Company; Brian Collins who creates hope through design at COLLINS Creative; Sophie Hughes who fashions fearless jewelry at Ore; Jon Friedman who reduces the carbon footprint of our food through Freight Farms; and Toni Elka, a painter who speaks food as a first language, equipping youth to be our Future Chefs. These entrepreneurs are making the kind of world we all want to live in.

Among our alums are international leaders in the art world like Arne Glimcher, founder of Pace Galleries, who recently collaborated with our own Bakalar and Paine Gallery staff to curate the stunning exhibit *Chinese Dreams*, showing the work of eight Chinese artists affected by the Cultural Revolution. Alumna Ella Augusta Norcross, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century painter, was one of the first Americans to have an exhibition at the Louvre, and it was her sizable estate that helped establish the Fitchburg Art Museum.<sup>5</sup> How very MassArt of her, to imagine that she could do what women of her day were told they couldn't, and in so doing to give back to her community in a way that remains to this day.

Among our alums are designers like Stephen Smith who designed for New Balance and Reebok; Jennifer Morla who designed for Levi's, whose work is in the

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<sup>5</sup> Mary Ann Stankiewicz, *Developing Visual Arts Education in the United States: Massachusetts Normal Art School and the Normalization of Creativity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 115-16.

permanent collection at MoMA, and who was just this year honored with the 2017 Cooper Hewitt/Smithsonian Award in Communication Design. And there is Muriel Cooper, that pioneer of information landscapes who dreamed of making words fly. The computer user interface you now take for granted exists in part because of her unyielding imagination. At MIT she founded the Visible Language Workshop, was an integral part of the groundbreaking MIT Media Lab, where she taught a course in “Creative Seeing.” She didn’t come to MassArt just to learn to draw; she came to MassArt to learn to see. MassArt made her fearless to design the kind of world we want to live in.

Among our alums are master teachers, so many of whom sit in this room that I won’t dare call out just a few names. But I will affirm that there is no occupation that exceeds the value of our alums who teach. They don’t typically make a lot of money, and their acclaim is far less than they deserve. But they don’t do what you do for the money and they don’t do it for acclaim. They do it because they know their work literally changes the lives of young people.

That’s a legacy written into the college that was originally named Massachusetts Normal Art School. A “normal” school was a teaching school. There one learned the “norms” of teaching. To this day, walk into schools in the Commonwealth and beyond and you will find hundreds of MassArt alums, thousands across the years, who have taught and are teaching the next generation of our children to see. How very MassArt of these teachers, to see in their students what can be.

As the first institution of its kind in the United States, and the first to offer degrees, MassArt has been called the “alma mater par excellence” because of the indelible mark of our alums on art education throughout the nation. Albert Munsell founded the color system that remains the basis of teaching color today. Eugene Colby was the first teacher and principal of Rochester Institute of Technology. Royal Bailey Farnum became an influential leader at Rhode Island School of Design, which we are proud to call our sister institution and which has generously sent a delegation to be with us on this occasion today.

Among the notable alums in the field of education, none is more so than Frances Euphemia Thompson. As an African American woman in the 1930s, Thompson envisioned how art education could help improve the lives of African Americans in her home state of Tennessee. She returned to teach at what is now the Tennessee State University, her MassArt thesis was adapted and published by the Tennessee Department of Education as a manual for elementary school teachers, and she served the people of Tennessee as a professor and arts leader for nearly 60 years. Frances Euphemia Thompson could see the kind of world we all want to live in.

At MassArt, students learn practices that matter not only for the work they will do, but for the people they will become: curiosity and critique, reflection and resilience, problem-solving and persistence. Here they do their best work and become their best selves. They see what can be, and then they go make it.

That's why we continue to educate students – because we could all use some more good. If artists do not do their work, they are impoverished. I'm less worried about whether an alum will wait tables or work in the medical field in order to keep creating their art than I am the artist who gives up their work because they are told it's beneath them to order their household in a way that doesn't maximize dollars. The truly "starving" artist is the one who forsakes the opportunity to enact their imagination or has that taken from them. And we're all impoverished if we're deprived of their creations. You see, if the artist does not do her work, not only is she impoverished; the world is impoverished. We are impoverished. We will not see what we should see.

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That's why we're taking a moment to *see beyond* dollars to the rich dividends of better lives and a better world.

To be clear, I'm not saying MassArt needs no funding. I am saying that to measure the return on your investment in MassArt merely in financial terms is to demean its value. In that case you aim merely to trade money for more money, rather than trading money for more good. Every dollar of public funding matters, every grant matters, every bit of corporate support and every private dollar matters. Many of you know by now I won't be shy about telling you that such support matters. But I also want to be explicit about *why* it matters – not because your dollars promise more dollars but because your support promises more good!

It is common today in higher education, as in government and business, to measure the success of our work in various metrics, in data and dollars. I have no opposition to metrics, I have no opposition to data, and I certainly have no opposition to dollars. I have no opposition to accountability, especially regarding our use of public funds given so generously by the taxpayers of Massachusetts. In fact, I insist on such accountability. We are better for it.

Yet, if we make data and dollars the final measure of things, we will inevitably undervalue the most important things.

At MassArt we can tout some impressive metrics. In a nation where as many as one in three first year college students don't return for their second year, nine of ten MassArt students do. In a nation where only 59% of those who enroll in college complete their degree within six years, 72% of MassArt students do. In a nation where students of color are still underrepresented in colleges and universities, MassArt's incoming class this year is over 30% self-identified as African American, Latinx, Asian, and Native American. This year 600 Boston Public School students participated in our Looking to Learn gallery education program, and we have opened our doors to some 2000 children and youth through Family Days, Saturday Studios, and Summer Programs. On our campus, students are taught by 135 full-



time faculty, 93% with terminal degrees, and dozens of adjuncts, faculty who possess piles of prestigious awards from Fulbrights to Gugenheims to notable exhibitions and award-winning designs. All that, while our students graduate with less debt and more competitive job prospects. So we can talk numbers.

The numbers can tell you that MassArt is remarkable. The numbers can tell you that MassArt is, by national standards, both excellent and accessible. They can hint that there's no place in the world like MassArt. But the metrics don't tell you what makes us MassArt.

The numbers don't tell you about the mastery, creativity, and compassion shown by our faculty every day. The numbers don't tell you about the uniquely talented staff and administration who serve this institution in such generous ways. The numbers don't tell you how the lives of children are truly impacted and changed, how the trajectories of their lives are altered for the good, in our galleries and studios year after year. The numbers don't tell you about the alums who do such extraordinary work in their fields while caring so deeply not only about their own good but about the good of those around them. No number is adequate to describe, recalling the words of Robert Kennedy, the joy of their work, the beauty of their creations, the intelligence of their public discourse, the strength of their will, the impact of their public service, their wit and courage, their compassion.

No metric can capture the ways in which our college – with its students, faculty, staff, alums, and friends – makes our world the place we want to live.

That's what makes MassArt MassArt. Every hour we give, every dollar we invest is a tangible investment not only in the goods economy, but more importantly – yes *more* importantly – in the good economy, the stewardship of our resources for the common good.

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With that truth in mind, I recall Frances Euphemia Thompson, our renowned alumna who saw a better world from Tennessee State University.

There is a story told of her by the famed journalist and author Carl Rowan. Rowan, known for his incisive commentary and activism on matters related to race in our nation, was a student of Professor Thompson at Tennessee State. As was her custom at the beginning of a new class, Professor Thompson asked Rowan and his classmates to write down what grade they each expected to receive. Rowan, reflecting on his previous artistic inexperience, wrote down that he expected a C.

That day Professor Thompson asked to see Rowan after class. A "C"?! You should be ashamed of yourself! I know you can do better than that, she said. You have to think big.

Rowan indeed earned higher grades in other courses for which he had more aptitude, but he took Professor Thompson up on her challenge to imagine something better than he'd imagined before. He did not manage an A in Professor Thompson's class. He did earn an A on more than one project for her, and he went on to join the Navy and was among the first 15 African Americans to achieve officer rank. Rowan credited Professor Thompson for inspiring him to do better in every area of his life.

That is a story that seems so very MassArt: a teacher engaging a student to see beyond what is to what can be. That's why we say, What can you do with a MassArt education? Anything you want.

The story of Frances Euphemia Thompson has enchanted me, perhaps haunted me – in the best sense – since my arrival here. That is, no doubt, due to her remarkable accomplishments, but it is also due to our historical moment. We are in a day when the inequity and injustice endemic to our culture are both undeniable and indefensible. Our city and our college are not immune to such inequity and injustice. I can hear the echo of Professor Thompson chiding: Settling for the status quo? You should be ashamed of yourself! I know you can do better than that!

These facts of inequity and injustice in the US – and they are facts – are among the reasons that we, for example, no longer require standardized tests to enter MassArt. This is not a lowering of the bar. Those tests tell us so little about student aptitude and prospects for success, while they do keep qualified, talented students out of college, and that is an injustice we will no longer abide. We can be better than that, in this and so many other ways.

Some of you know that a gallery bearing Professor Thompson's name existed in the old Longwood building. When the move to this campus occurred, the gallery was not relocated. As a tangible sign that we're taking up Professor Thompson's challenge, this Spring we will rename our current President's Gallery the Francis Euphemia Thompson Gallery as a perpetual reminder that we, MassArt, can be better. We can work to create the kind of world we all want to live in.

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In 1871, in order to engage the citizens of the state in the opportunities to come at MassArt, the Commonwealth created a traveling museum that set out by wagon across Massachusetts. Like the founders, we can't fully see today what all MassArt might become, but I propose we take that wagon out again, to take the influence of this institution to every corner of the Commonwealth. We are not *Boston's* College of Art and Design. We are Massachusetts College of Art and Design, here to serve the people of the Commonwealth and beyond.

In the days to come, we will, in particular, look for willing partners in cities and towns and institutions who share our appreciation for why art and imagination

matter. We will work with K-12 schools, our community colleges, our fellow state universities, and other organizations to ensure that the pathways to meaningful work in art and design are evident to families and accessible to our people. I am appreciative of the partnership we already have with Boston Public Schools and hope to strengthen it, and I hope that all our educational institutions will collaborate to create a comprehensive kindergarten through college strategy to serve the people of Massachusetts. We will insure that the mission of the school as the Commonwealth's school – the people's college – remains, and we will continue to make this school accessible and affordable to talented students from diverse backgrounds.

To that end, as we complete fundraising for our gallery renovations within the next year, we will then turn our sights to building a sizable endowment to fund scholarships, faculty chairs, and academic and engagement programs like research projects, gallery education for children, and our Center for Art and Community Partnerships. We will not set our sights too high if we work to build a \$50 million endowment over the next decade. That can be done if some imaginative people can see a world where MassArt still matters. I believe it does, and I am determined to lead us to do it.

Let's together see what can be, and go make it. Together, we will draw it and write it, we will design it and do it. I hope you will imagine with us, see with us, and work with us, in true MassArt tradition, to make our world the place we all want to live.