

Democracy Inventory Profile

Independent Arts Institutions: Pratt Institute and California College of the Arts

Brian Harlan

Part One: What was the context for this profile?

There are currently over 60 independent, degree-granting, four-year colleges with a special focus on the arts in the United States. The orientation of these institutions toward politics is partly influenced by the iconoclastic characteristics of individual artists, and in many cases, as a collective as well. The relationship between art and democracy, particularly when defined as liberal democracy, is more direct. Taken as a system that mediates among differing and often conflicting worldviews of justice, equity, individual autonomy and dignity, liberal democracy is represented in the minds of artists, in the content of many works of art, and in the creative freedom of the artistic process itself. In 2012, as an example, the National Endowment for the Arts established a model for how art works within society and discovered a strong positive correlation between arts participation and civic engagement. This was identified among other benefits that further support democracy, such as tolerance of diversity, openness to inquiry, and the reinforcement of productive ways to participate within a group. Ostensibly the practice of art, like democracy, mediates our collective values.

Furthermore, Nancy Thomas, Executive Director of the Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, has clarified that democracy is not only a system of governance, but also a culture that defines the way people live and work together. Democracy establishes and draws upon a set of values that can inform how we collectively solve social and environmental problems. In this sense, our democracy rises from shared tenets such as distributed authority, tolerance for dissent, independent thought and speech, and an open and reciprocal sharing of information. Taking this concept even still further, in her 2022 book entitled *Rx Racial Healing*, Gail C. Christopher stated that “the task of an education allied with democracy is not merely to help students gain knowledge and skills but also to assist students in forming the habits of heart and mind that liberate their thinking”. Contemporary, post-secondary arts education stresses not only the learning of technical artistic skills, but equally the development of critical and individualistic thinking, openness to diverse perspectives, active listening and communication, analysis of information, self-reflection—and increasingly—civic responsibility and action. Such learning outcomes are essential for artists who aim to produce meaningful work that will impact society; work that contributes to political discourse by bringing new information to light, revealing and speaking against injustice, and creating the conditions for empathy that motivate others

toward action. Ultimately art assists communities in the balance of power, as can be seen in examples throughout history.

Part Two: Descriptions of Institutional Efforts

Two institutions are highlighted in this profile: Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York (Pratt), and California College of the Arts in San Francisco, California (CCA). These two institutions were identified in a close review of 49 of the 60 US special focus, visual and performing arts colleges. The review looked at mission statements, institutional learning outcomes, civic engagement initiatives such as voter information resources, student government activity, degree programs, and other initiatives and events. Three other institutions were notable among these criteria (College for Creative Studies, Otis College of Art and Design, and The Juilliard School), yet Pratt and CCA stood out as institutions attempting to take stock of their activities in order to improve coordination and impact. Many of their activities might be understood as democracy adjacent, in that they are not focused on the political issues or aim to develop skills for civic engagement. With an understanding of the important influence of art on democracy as culture, however, the activities of these institutions clearly and explicitly aim to promote values and beliefs that underpin democracy. Both Pratt and CCA also go beyond adjacency by educating students through college wide programs and initiatives that directly address the theory, principles, and practices of democracy, as well as the skills needed for engagement.

Pratt Institute

Pratt's [Center for Community Development](#) was launched in the 1960s and embodies the institute's position that informed inquiry and rational decision making are fundamental building blocks of both education and democracy. This position is also reflected in the institute's strategic plan as a primary pillar for civic engagement. Under this pillar the institute offers a minor in social justice/social practice, a master's degree in urban and community planning, and the institution's 2019 strategic plan states goals to establish civic literacy as an institutional learning goal and to assess and record all relevant coursework and co-curricular activities. Pratt Institute aims to ensure that a culture of civic ethos governs campus life through an infrastructure to incorporate civic and community-based learning within teaching, research, and student development. Another goal states that the institute will instill a sense of agency and commitment for life-long civic action through the capacity for collective work and the courage to take informed risks for the greater good. Finally, the institute also applies its democratic values to enhance its internal shared governance by supporting inquiry and understanding by fostering civil discourse in all forums.

Pratt institute has conducted survey research among its community to measure the level and extent of its civic engagement activity motivated by its strategic pillar. Challenges and lessons learned at Pratt through assessing and recording civic engagement activities have included the need to better

define and catalog just what constitutes such activity. The work for faculty to develop external partners and community relationships is also extensive and requires support. In response, the institute is assembling a toolkit as a teaching resource and is refining their learning outcomes for civic engagement. The institute is also exploring a course-tagging system that will allow students to quickly identify courses that support their development.

California College of the Arts

CCA launched [Creative Citizens in Action](#) in 2020. This initiative is focused on creative activism within visual and creative writing arts through an endowed gift by Deborah and Kenneth Novack. The college provides a dedicated space for lectures and social gatherings called the Creative Citizens Hub and uses this space to offer a series of internal and public programs. Faculty grants and student fellowships are also offered through the initiative, and a community committee called the Voting Coalition works to enhance voter education, registration, and turnout. Along with its mission to shape culture and society, based on the college's democratic values, CCA has also established a set of ethical principles called the Creative Accord. The Creative Accord is a collective agreement within the community that expresses a commitment to radical responsibility as interconnected citizens, thinking beyond assumptions through the application of critical curiosity, recognizing intersectionality and the multitude of ways to actively contribute to the community, and by cultivating creative action, defined as work that directly motivates social change.

CCA has done a scan of existing courses and faculty artistic work to measure its impact within the community. This inventory work began with the launch of Creative Citizens in Action and continues as a means to monitor progress. It has been conducted in two ways: by allowing faculty to self-nominate their courses or their artistic work, and simultaneously by conducting a review of activity through the Voting Coalition. What CCA found through this work is that faculty had been incorporating democratic engagement modules within courses on other topics and thus their efforts were not visible. There was initially no unified curriculum that organized these efforts, so faculty were not aware of what other faculty were doing. This inevitably led to lost opportunities for sharing ideas and resources. The inventory helped to inspire the creation of a course-tagging system that now allows faculty and students to easily identify Creative Citizen courses. Along with this, faculty grants to support democratic engagement outcomes in their courses have helped to connect faculty across different academic divisions. These connections are further enhanced through the center's programs and gatherings that encourage faculty to share ideas across the college, acknowledge best practices and successful outcomes, and provide effective resources for spreading the creative activism message on campus.