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TAKEAWAYS




# Lessons in Creativity and Communication

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# Lessons in Creativity and Communication

Key Takeaways from a virtual forum

Presented by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* with support from Adobe



## SPEAKERS

### Beckie Supiano

Senior Writer,  
*The Chronicle of  
Higher Education*

### Cassidy Drost

Recent graduate of  
Lehigh University.  
Public Affairs and  
Patient Advocacy,  
Sanofi

### Jane Hilberry

Professor of Creativity  
and Innovation and  
Schlosser Professor  
in the Arts,  
Colorado College

### Khanjan Mehta

Vice Provost for  
Creative Inquiry and  
Director of the  
Mountaintop Initiative,  
Lehigh University

### Alexia Preston

Recent graduate of  
Colorado College.  
Program manager  
at the Agility Lab,  
Nature  
Conservancy

### Keith Sawyer

Morgan Distinguished  
Professor in  
Educational  
Innovations,  
University of North  
Carolina at Chapel Hill

**E**mployers increasingly are looking for evidence of soft skills like creative problem-solving and communication when they are making hiring decisions. As a result, colleges need to find new ways to incorporate those skills broadly into the curriculum if they want to prepare graduates for a successful entry into the work force. But how can colleges best do that? Can something like creativity be taught? And what can we learn from the experiences of graduates who have recently begun working?

On August 17, *The Chronicle*, with support from Adobe, convened a virtual forum, “Lessons in Creativity and Communication,” to discuss these issues. The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, watch the recorded webinar [here](#).

**Beckie Supiano:** Can creativity really be taught, and how do you know?

**Keith Sawyer:** Absolutely, yes, creativity can be taught — and there’s tons of research on how to do that. To teach people to be creative, you really have to

change the way you teach. You have to teach every subject in ways that prepare students to be creative with that knowledge.

**Jane Hilberry:** I totally agree. As a teacher in the classroom, one thing you can do is set up conditions that foster creativity. We integrate the teaching of creativity across all disciplines, so it's not like a separate thing. It's definitely not strictly arts based.

A well-designed exercise can get students to a place where they can surprise themselves with their own creativity, and that becomes an occasion to discuss what about that exercise allowed them to be creative. So it can give students a chance to learn some principles that are transferable to creativity in other situations.

For example, there's a little book called *Not Quite What I Was Planning*, which is a book of six-word memoirs. I invite students to write their memoir in six words. I give them a bunch of examples, like "Met true love, married someone else." They can be moving, they can be funny. Students just have a few minutes, and then everybody reads them, and you get this little snapshot very quickly into who each person is in the room. Then you stop and say, OK, constraints are a huge part of the way that you work with creativity, and if you're in a real-world situation, you're going to have constraints that are built in — budget, materials, the people you work with — but working with constraints is something that is a part of any endeavor. If you can view that as a creative opportunity rather than as an obstacle, then you're already equipped to have more capacity.

**"Creativity can be taught — and there's tons of research on how to do that."**

**Khanjan Mehta:** I have teams working on a bunch of innovations, trying to design a \$1 diagnostic device for a sickle-cell trait. You have to be incredibly creative if you're trying to figure out how to design a \$1 diagnostic device. And that's where intrinsic motivation plays into it — there's an alignment between their values, their passions, and a problem that they truly deeply care about — that's where they're going to be their most creative selves.

**Supiano:** What are some misperceptions about creativity?

**Hilberry:** The biggest misconception is that people associate creativity with the arts. That's just a very limited view of creativity. Creativity is essentially the capacity to generate possibilities.

**Mehta:** The question I get all the time is, can creativity be taught? I don't like

that question very much, because creativity isn't something I teach so much as I nurture. It's as much about having the right supportive environment and motivations. In terms of the students, it's not about learning creativity as much as it's about becoming creative. It's a whole journey, it's a process — it's really a contact sport. You become more creative by exercising your creativity and by actually doing stuff. Experiential learning is a great way to foster creativity — it puts students in the driver's seat and lets them try new things, to experiment, to learn as much as they need to unlearn, so really it is as much about unlearning as it is about learning.

**Supiano:** What might a college consider if it's interested in building out creativity as a focal point?

**Mehta:** The value for the students is developing not just content knowledge and specific skill sets, but the kinds of 21st-century mind-sets that are going to be helpful for them for all the different kinds of jobs they're going to have over their 40-year career.

**Hilberry:** At Colorado College, our first iteration of an innovation program was very oriented toward start-up and tech enterprises, and it became clear very quickly that that didn't align with our values as a liberal-arts college. And it wasn't a particularly inclusive approach because the people who tended to be drawn to that already tended to have more resources, experience, and confidence. So we made a major shift, and one big piece we built in was that we consider creativity to be the precursor to any type of innovation. We have three areas that we focus on: one is mindfulness, one is creative problem-solving, and the third is resilience. The intersection of those is the changemaker space, where students are putting their ideas into action.

But our main approach is that we work with faculty members who are already doing creative things in their classrooms or have something they want to try out. We try to facilitate interdisciplinary connections to bring people together on campus that might not usually work with each other.

**Supiano:** What steps can individual professors take?

**Mehta:** I would focus on the pedagogy, and ultimately, it comes down to three words: open-ended questions. We try to fill up our classes with so much knowledge, but students are going to learn so much more, and they're going to be so much more invested in their own learning, if they are focusing on asking

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good questions and then trying to find answers to those questions.

**Hilberry:** Create a space for students where they're not being judged. That makes room for intrinsic motivation — connecting students with their own native curiosity. If students do that, they will outperform — they will take it so much farther — they will do astonishing things.

**Supiano:** How does this conversation dovetail with your own experience in and after college?

**Cassidy Drost:** The program at Lehigh was really the first time that I got to interact with students from all different areas and with professors that shared this similar mind-set about projects. To be a part of that environment was awesome, because in my pre-med environment, I was just so incredibly focused on grades. I had a very quantitative view of my learning and was not really thinking so much about once I do graduate, how do I apply soft skills?

After college, I didn't go to medical school, but it has been so helpful to have this mind-set. I'm in a development program where I rotate every year within a pharmaceutical company, and so every year I'm changing my job role. It's a little tough on my self-esteem because you finally feel like you're getting good at something, and you have to start over and do a completely new role. But the Lehigh program was all about pivoting — going into untapped areas that are uncharted — there's no playbook. Applying that mind-set and thinking into my job has been game changing.

**Supiano:** How might this work become part of the broader student experience?

**Alexia Preston:** Understanding the creative process is really important because it allows students to tap into that learning throughout the rest of their academic experience. If we can equip and empower other faculty with the ability to say, How is this related to the creative process? How are we being creative in crafting this paper? How are we going to synthesize this in a really meaningful way? Because creativity is happening across campuses everywhere; it's just not labeled.