

MACARTHUR FELLOWS PROGRAM

Our Society Discourages Innovation

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Is creativity endangered?

Critics have lamented the “creativity crisis” in recent years, faulting an education system focused on standardized tests and a reliance on technology that atrophies the mind. But The Times recently reported that in the summer, many schools nationwide become incubators for creativity. And every September, the “genius grants” from the MacArthur Foundation highlight plenty of innovative individuals for whom technology has sharpened the mind, not dulled it.

Are the critics onto something? If creativity is endangered, what is suppressing it, and what would reverse the trend?

By Cecilia Conrad

Reports of the death of American creativity are an exaggeration. The hyperloop, Google Glass, nano-pharmaceuticals and mind-controlled robotic legs are all examples of its continued vitality.

That said, people with innovative and cutting-edge ideas have likely spent much of their lives swimming against the tide.

Creativity flourishes at the intersections of traditional disciplines, but traditional means of assessment often marginalize individuals working to define new and unique fields of endeavor. From the high-stakes tests in K-12, to the academic tenure clock, to the economy’s focus on short-term return on investments, American society’s reward structures tend to discourage unconventional thinking and limit risk-taking.

And yet, creativity thrives in an environment where individuals have the freedom to devote time and effort to ideas and projects that may not have an immediate payoff—projects like John Dabiri’s analysis of the aerodynamics of schools of fish, to inform the optimal placement of wind turbines. Creativity requires giving self-directed original thinkers space for the missteps and dead ends that are often prerequisites for groundbreaking work. That’s the philosophy behind the MacArthur Fellows program and its “no strings attached” grants.

For over 30 years, the MacArthur Foundation has recognized and inspired creativity among the Dabiris of the world through its fellowship program. Each year the program awards 20 to 25 exceptionally talented individuals five-year, unrestricted fellowships, which the news media have dubbed “genius grants.”

The widespread adoption of a “no strings attached” rewards structure is neither practical nor advisable. However, the basic insight—that the best incubator for creativity is an environment that gives the individual autonomy and flexibility—should inform the design of incentives in both the schoolhouse and the workplace. A healthy society requires that we cultivate the next generation of innovators to maintain economic competitiveness, to solve deep-rooted social problems and to create objects of beauty that inspire.