A New Minor in Arts and Social Change

By Cynthia Cohen, Director, Program in Peacebuilding and the Arts, International Center for Ethics, Justice and Public Life

As this issue of State of the Arts attests, transition is inevitable, whether at Brandeis or in the world at large. We are called upon not only to change the world in the direction of greater justice, but also to be resilient in the face of change, much of it as unpredictable as it is unwelcome.

It seems certain that leadership in the 21st century will require capacities to engage creatively with large-scale interrelated environmental, political and economic changes that might well be catastrophic. Students will confront challenges that can be addressed effectively only through knowledge that is interdisciplinary; through exploration that links theory and practice; and as emerging theory on resilience indicates, through flexible networks based on shared values, generosity and trust.

How does Brandeis University carry out its mission in the face of the multiplicity of likely changes, some characterized as surely by dazzling velocity as by uncertain trajectory? How do we challenge and support our students to develop capacities for resilience, for “bouncing back” intellectually, culturally, ethically, emotionally and spiritually?

As a researcher in social change, I see that the arts offer opportunities for the qualities of learning and presence required for resilience in the face of complex adversity. I have seen evidence that aesthetic engagement can spark people’s imagination and inspire action in the world. Performances of theater and ritual offer platforms where traumatized communities can construct meaning out of traumatic experiences. The simultaneous engagement of our senses, intellects and spirits is restorative, and the experience of the creativity of the group instills a sense of hope.

With input from dozens of faculty members from the schools of the creative arts, humanities and social science, and in response to students’ interests, Brandeis has launched a new interdisciplinary minor in Creativity, the Arts and Social Transformation (CAST).

"Many faculty at Brandeis — in music, theater and fine arts, but also in anthropology, sociology, politics, English, comparative literature and various regional studies — already teach courses that incorporate aspects of art and social change," says Jennifer Cleary of the Department of Theater Arts, who co-chairs the faculty committee with me. "The minor will allow us to synthesize what we are already doing, and form new cross-disciplinary faculty relationships — which I for one am excited about!" Cleary adds.

CAST will challenge students to examine the anguish- and hope-filled borderland between human suffering and human possibility. Some of the works we will explore are virtuosic, some inclusive; some gentle and soothing, others provocative. We are invited into qualities of presence that open us to new perceptions of ourselves, each other and the world, and cultivate capacities to engage complex challenges with understanding, creativity and resilience.

With generous support from the Max and Sunny Howard Memorial Foundation, the minor will sponsor small grants for faculty research and creative projects, and host conversations and events that will invite affiliated students and faculty into an interdisciplinary community of inquiry. We also express gratitude to Naomi Sinnreich ‘13 for her vision and support.

The minor’s core course, "Introduction to Creativity, the Arts and Social Transformation" (CAST 150b), will be offered in spring 2015. Objectives, learning goals and requirements for the minor are listed in the online Provisional Course Bulletin. Students who are interested in signing up for the minor can email Jennifer Cleary, jacleary@brandeis.edu, or call 781-736-3377. Additional details are online: go.brandeis.edu/CASTminor.