

Enhancing self-awareness: Integrating Himalayan art in a career planning class

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ABSTRACT

The dilemma for many college students' job search process is their overwhelming desire to locate any job rather than to satisfy their true passions. Thus, a job search can become a highly instrumental, task-oriented process, preventing students' opportunity to discover themselves and their life's purpose. Self-awareness, however, is a central concept in career planning and development because understanding one's self is crucial for job search success. Thus, self-assessment is a foremost topic in career planning classes because job satisfaction is closely linked to employees' interest in the tasks they perform. This study explores the effects of using Himalayan art in a career planning class on students' self-awareness and understanding in their job search preparation stage. The idea was inspired by the principle of Baruch College-Rubin Museum Project: that is, exposure to and participation in the arts enrich students' college experience and greatly enhance their ability to learn, understand, and function on a much higher than usual level throughout their lives. Twenty-five students from a career planning class in a community college in North America participated in this study. The findings support that a majority of students were able to query their life purpose, set career goals and connect art with the career planning subject. In addition, students' feedback supports the statement that art is an effective medium in supporting students' learning and in building connections with subject knowledge.

Keywords: art, career planning, community college, job search, self-awareness

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INTRODUCTION

Career planning and development is a process that begins with helping students to gain self-understanding and to develop and refine their goals accordingly. Additionally, a job search is a self-exploration journey that helps students to find their uniqueness, strengths, skills, and personality. Though some students arrive at college with a particular career goal in mind, many are in the process of deciding the direction they want to take. Both the undecided and the very focused require help in terms of exploring their options and learning strategies, and in obtaining resources that help them in the decision-making process. The dilemma for many college students' job search process is their overwhelming desire to locate any job rather than to satisfy their true passions. A job search thus becomes an instrumental and task-oriented process that prevents students from discovering themselves and their life's purpose.

Self-awareness, a central concept in career development, refers to the realistic and accurate perception of one's interests, values, skills, limitations, and lifestyle preferences. Self-awareness requires individuals to take the time to develop insights into themselves and assess what is meaningful to them in their lives; thus, it is important for successful career decision making and career management (Singh 2006). A series of questions—such as “What do you enjoy? Why do you enjoy it? What are your goals? What type of things do you seem to do well? What is really important to you? What kinds of tasks will ultimately bring you satisfaction? What are your values? What lifestyle do you want to live? What will make you happy or unhappy?”—should be presented to students in a holistic way. Those who have a deep sense of self-understanding can determine whether they are the right fit for a job and can make a right decision accordingly. College students are normally encouraged to avail themselves of individual assessment instruments, such as the Strong Interest Inventory, Self-Directed Search, Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, and Life Style Inventory, all of which help individuals gain a better understanding of their interests, values, personality factors, and lifestyle preferences. However, one challenge that can impede assessment proficiency, according to Singh, may be students' self-esteem and their level of anxiety because the process of acquiring personal information about oneself can cause anxiety and be a threat to one's self esteem (p. 712). Highly anxious people may become defensive about any threatening self-related information and may distort, dismiss, or misinterpret that information, resulting in an inaccurate self-assessment. Asking students to examine their performance appraisals and to seek feedback from others can also support their self-exploration in a formal way. Journal writing can also be a very useful approach to self-reflection. Students can reflect on questions, analyze highs and lows in their lives, and visualize their ideal job. Two vital inquiry questions for students to explore are “Who am I?” and “Whom do I want to become?” for their self-exploration. In fact, these questions can be frightening and confusing as well. Thus, a genuine and authentic approach to teaching and guiding students to explore these questions can provide a safe learning environment and hence emotional safety. Moreover, a holistic approach to career planning can help students not only to identify their interests, skills, and traits but also to know their life purpose so that they can live a meaningful life.

ART AND CAREER PLANNING

Integrating art into a career planning class to support students' self-awareness and understanding is an innovative pedagogical design. Learning should be a holistic process

involving the cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions. According to Efland (1990), “Art enables human beings to realize their spirit and their destiny in the actions and products of their imagination” (p. 263). However, not much research exists on using art to support students’ job search preparation in a career curriculum. This research study to explore the use of Himalayan art in a career planning class for encouraging students’ self-awareness was the result of a summer planning grant and faculty fellowship (2012-2013) from the Baruch College-Rubin Museum of Art Project (usually referred to as “the Project”). The inspiration for this study was the principle behind the Baruch College-Rubin Museum Project: that exposure to and participation in the arts enrich students’ college experience and greatly enhance their ability to learn, understand, and function on a much higher level throughout their lives. The funding and support from Baruch College and the Rubin Museum of Art provided an opportunity for exploring the effects of using various works of art in the Rubin Museum in a career planning class on students’ self-awareness and understanding as preparation for their job search.

The Rubin Museum of Art has the largest Western collection of religious art from cultures of the Himalayan mountain range, including those of Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan, as well as the interrelated traditions of India, Mongolia, and China. Its mission is to provide a dynamic environment that stimulates learning, promotes understanding, and inspires personal connections to the ideas, cultures, and art of Himalayan Asia. Every visitor can see a quote displayed in the lobby of the museum by its founders, Shelley and Donald Rubin: “The emotion generated by viewing a great work of art is very much like falling in love. The passion radiating from the art overtakes us with its power and beauty. It’s truly a heart connection.” How can works of arts create meaning and help students find their own love and passion for planning their future careers? The museum offers schools new and inspiring ways to make curricular connections, inspire learning, and expand opportunities for students and teachers.

A job search can be a very instrumental and task-oriented process if people cannot identify what attributes contribute to their work and general happiness. In general, job satisfaction and general happiness are positively related (Smith, 2007). Job satisfaction is closely linked to employees’ having an interest in the tasks they perform. A report on work happiness indicators in 2012 indicated that one of the top ranked attributes for work happiness is “interesting work” (JobsCentral, 2012). When one is interested in the task one performs, work becomes interesting. Students’ understanding about their own selves and what their passions are can help them create a happier career life. Thus, a need for an aesthetic pedagogical design to support students’ self-discovery journey becomes important with no time. Maxine Greene, Lincoln Center Institute (LCI) philosopher-in-residence, defined “aesthetic education” in her book *Variations on a Blue Guitar* (2001) as an intentional undertaking designed to nurture appreciative, reflective, cultural, and participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what there is to be noticed, and to incorporate works of art into their lives in variously meaningful ways. Aesthetics is concerned with perception, sensation, and imagination, and with how these relate to knowing and understanding the world (Greene, 2009). Greene has also inspired teachers to recognize perception, cognition, affect, and the imagination as ways of knowing. Her philosophy and vision highlight the importance of helping students to find meaning and purpose in life through connections to their learning subjects, spiritual values, and community.

Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu once said, “At the center of your being you have the answer; you know who you are and you know what you want” (Howard, Korver, & Birchard 2008, p. 51). Behavioral research also suggests that the most effective people are those who

understand themselves (Doe, 2002). Even though knowing the self is an important journey for every job seeker, however, teaching career planning in a museum sounds odd. The students were confused and many questioned, “Why do we need to go to a museum for a career planning class?” In truth, people do not normally relate art to career planning or job searching. However, museums provide an environment for learning and teaching, though not always in direct ways (Tran, 2006). Some studies (Tran, 2006; Mitchell, 2008) have demonstrated that museums provide important learning opportunities that potentially bridge the gap between the classroom and the world beyond. Chatterjee’s (2007) research described how museum collections and object handling are beneficial for hospital patients. A series of questions were posed after the patients chose their objects: “Why have you chosen that object? What do you think this object is? What does the object feel like? Can you think of any experience that might relate to this object? Where do you think it comes from? What material do you think it is made of?” Chatterjee (2010) also indicated that objects can be employed in a variety of ways to enhance and disseminate subject specific knowledge; to facilitate the acquisition of communication and team work, as well as practical, observational, and drawing skills; and for inspiration. A work of art can become an object of experience and affect one’s perspectives on nature, human beings, and moment-to-moment existence (Greene, 2001). Following the aforementioned studies, this research also explored students’ learning experiences from museum objects and their trip to the Rubin.

MUSEUM OBJECTS FOR CAREER PLANNING STUDENTS

Before taking students on a museum trip, the instructor met several times with Dr. Laura Lombard, University Programs and Partnerships Manager at the Rubin Museum of Art, about the selection of the museum objects, discussed the objectives of the career planning class, and identified specific objects that might be appropriate for curriculum goals. The five objects selected are presented here, along with the reasons for selecting them.

Object 1: Shakyamuni Buddha



[Source: Rubin Museum of Art]

Reason for Selection

The term *Buddha*, meaning “awakened” or “enlightened,” was first used to refer to Shakyamuni, who lived sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE in northern India and whose teachings became the foundation of Buddhism. Shakyamuni became the Buddha by

achieving enlightenment (i.e., a complete understanding of the true nature of reality), freeing him from the endless cycle of suffering. Because finding one's life purpose is crucial to any job seeker in career planning, Buddha's life story can help students to reflect upon and discover their own life purpose.

Object 2: Yellow Jambhala

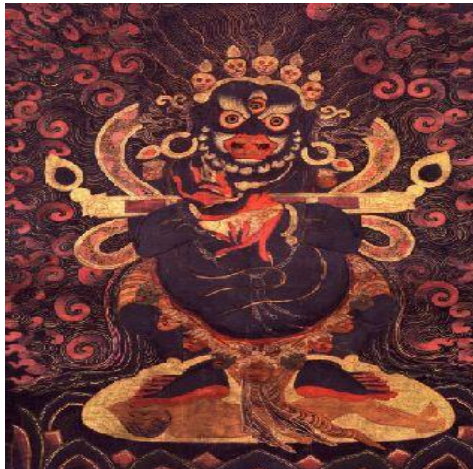


[Source: Rubin Museum of Art]

Reason for Selection

Jambhala is the lord of wealth and protector of the Dharma. He helps people by eliminating poverty so that they may practice the Dharma. Those who become rich are better able to be unselfish and generous. Students desire to have high paying jobs, and this desire means that it is extremely important to encourage them to reflect on the deeper meaning of wealth.

Object 3: Mahakala (Buddhist Protector)



[Source: Rubin Museum of Art]

Reason for Selection

In Tantric Buddhist traditions, one kind of deity is shown as wrathful in appearance – with flaming hair, bulging eyes, open mouth showing fangs, and garlands of severed heads. Nonetheless, this deity is one of the enlightened beings that assume fierce appearances to remove obstacles or perform other protective functions. Though it may look like a demon, it is a wrathful manifestation of wisdom and method. Job searching is a long process that is usually very stressful and difficult. It requires job seekers’ persistence, dedication, and patience in dealing with rejection, and feelings of frustration, anger, and depression are part of the career search process. This work of art can help students learn to channel their negative energies into positive ones and become aware of their own acts and emotions.

Object 4: Durga (Hindu Deity)



[Source: Rubin Museum of Art]

Reason for Selection

Durga, a Hindu deity, is depicted with multiple arms, carrying various weapons and riding a ferocious lion or tiger. She is often pictured as battling demons, particularly the buffalo demon. The word *Durga* also means “invincible” and “unbeatable.” Before and during an employment search, students will face many different challenges. From this artwork, students can start identifying their demons, such as their weaknesses, and learning about gaining strength to conquer their demons.

Object 5: Wheel of Existence



[Source: Rubin Museum of Art]

Reason for Selection

The wheel of existence is a representation of Buddhist beliefs about the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, known as *samsara*. The energy produced by one's past actions (karma) is the force that traps beings within this cyclical existence. The career search process can be overwhelmingly long and discouraging. Students need to keep trying in facing obstacles and taking responsibility for their own job search. In reality, the process of job searching can help students build certain good qualities—persistence, determination, commitment, and responsibility. This object can also help students reflect on what personal qualities that they would like to cultivate within themselves.

This study was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the effects of using museum objects from the Rubin Museum of Art on students' self-awareness and understanding?
2. To what extent can art be an effective way for a career curriculum to support students' job search preparation?

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted as a qualitative study using a survey and interviews. In fall 2012, a group of 25 career-planning students was invited to the Rubin Museum of Art in the middle of the semester. The purpose of the visit was to explore students' learning experiences from the museum visit and to discover, if possible, how the use of museum objects supported their learning through the stories and teachings behind the selected museum objects: Shakyamuni Buddha, Yellow Jambhala, Mahakala, Durga, and Wheel of Existence. Students attended a 45-minute tour that focused on these five selected objects. Through actually viewing the objects, students were able to identify and articulate layers of detail in a work of art. After the tour, the students spent another 30 minutes in the museum to respond to a series of questions from a museum visit booklet [Appendix 1]. With two museum curators' guidance, by responding to the

questions from the museum booklet and participating in an after-visit group discussion, the students were able to ascertain the connections among the artwork, career planning concepts, and their personal life endeavors.

As yet another component of this study, toward the end of the semester, the students were assigned a reflective writing assignment about their learning experience from the trip, which also included an art-making component. Object drawing can help students to embody deep individual learning, and art making can be a deeply emotional as well as spiritual process. Yet, even art may be greatly dominated by our rational thoughts. Thus, the art-making assignment should be carefully planned out to ensure that students maintain comprehension of the assignment’s goals, and the meaning behind their own artwork. The art making assigned to students was titled “My Life Mandala.” The term *mandala* is Sanskrit meaning “circle,” which is the symbol of eternity, unity, and completeness. According to Fincher (2010), mandala means center, circumference, or magic circle. Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung associated the mandala with the Self, the center of the total personality. He suggested that the mandala shows the natural urge to live out our potential, to fulfill the pattern of our whole personality. Growth toward wholeness is a natural process that brings to light one’s uniqueness and individuality, a process that Jung called “individuation.” The result of this process is a harmonious unity of the personality, with the Self serving as the central unifying principle (Fincher 2010, p. 2). After students study a unique work of art to absorb its meaning they should be able to develop a fulfilling harmony and draw their life mandala accordingly. Such an individual life mandala can serve as a guide for meeting their life goals. Finally, after submitting the grades for the course, the instructor conducted a 30-minute interview with five students about their overall experience.

DATA AND FINDINGS

In their reflective writing, students were asked to select one work of art that they found most interesting and that had the greatest effect on their learning and helped them to connect to the subject—career planning. The following charts summarize the students’ reflections on their chosen objects, their connections of these objects with the career planning concepts that they learned in class, the key ideas they gained, and a one-word description of the object.

Art: Shakyamuni Buddha



[A student’s drawing]

Five students chose Buddha, and two themes emerged in students’ reflective writing:

Theme 1: The Ability to Inquire about their Life Purpose

“The Buddha did not know anything about suffering and being poor; however, he decided to leave everything to go and experience those things. Maybe I should do something of what the Buddha did. I should spend some time to think about what I really want to achieve in life.”

“...Buddha reached that level and got answers to his questions. I think I can also search what I want and achieve my career by focusing on my goals.”

“I can relate with Buddha’s story about my career planning which I want to become a FBI detective. It is similar to him enlightening myself to others, environment not only the life I live, seen what other people really suffers and how can I help. I can’t help to stop death but I could help for something better.”

Theme 2: Understand the Power of Goal Setting

“Everybody has the power to do and resolve whatever we want as long as we focus on our goals.”

“We should be focused on our goals in order to achieve. When we want to make our career dream come true, first, we need to learn to give up something. Learn to give up doesn’t mean we fail, it means we know which is more important.”

Art: Yellow Jambhala



[A student’s drawing]

Two students chose the Yellow Jambhala and one important theme emerged in the students’ reflective writing:

Theme: Finding One’s Own Meaning of Wealth

“I want a job that will benefit me financially, so I can provide for my family just like the people who pray for wealth ...I found to be generous is important... I want to make great money not only for me, my family, but also people who need help.”

“The connection that made with this artwork is that how it’s better to give than to receive. Also, his representation on wealth is what I am aiming for. I liked that he is wealthy but still giving to others.”

Art: Mahakala



[A student's drawing]

Two students chose Mahakala, the Buddha's protector, and one important theme emerged in the students' reflective writing:

Theme: Maintain a Positive Attitude toward Negative Criticism

"In my career, there are always competitions and criticism. I should have positive attitude toward others' critical comments and learn how I can improve myself."

"It's hard to take other people's negative feedback. I am not perfect. This object taught me how not to take others negative feedback personally. Their comments might help me succeed."

Art: Durga



[A student's drawing]

Seven students chose the object Durga and two themes emerged in students' reflective writing.

Theme 1: Understand the Importance of Learning Required Skills for the Job Search

"The connection I can make is that I have to be calm when searching for a job. I also have to have all the career-related skills in order to be successful in my future career."

"I think this art can connect to my career planning and job search because if I want to get into a good company, the first thing that I have to be good at is not writing a resume to impress others but to gain knowledge and job skills. Then, I will have the ability to achieve whatever my boss asks me to do. I think the knowledge and job skills are my power as to Durga's 18 arms."

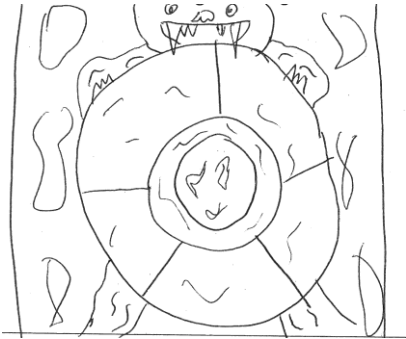
Theme 2: Build Strength and Be Strong in Facing Difficulties

"I can compare this to my career planning because I want to be a strong, independent, and skillful woman. Durga went after something she believed in and accomplished her mission. I would love to have a support system that makes me powerful as Durga."

"We all have a demon we have to slay in our life time and there will be thing[s to] attack us. Job search process is very stressful. I need to stand strong and fight back to be successful in finding a job."

"At the beginning, every job will have some troubles and difficult time. We should use our power and [be] brave ... against this problem."

Art: Wheel of Existence



[A student's drawing]

Four students chose the Wheel of Existence, and two themes emerged in students' reflective writing:

Theme 1: Know the Importance of Following Passions

“Do not waste time and just do it.”

“Life is short, so follow your passions.”

“Don't focus too much on financial wealth, more on happiness.”

Theme 2: Build Good Character

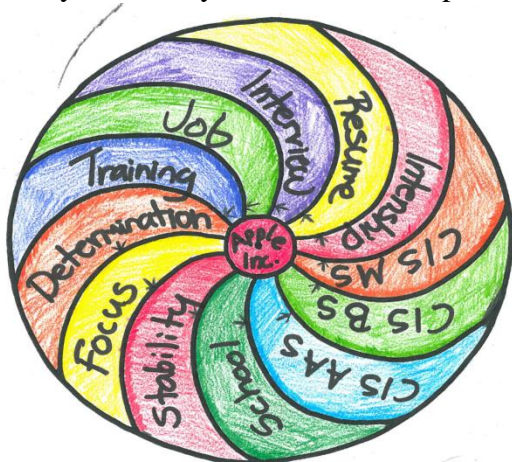
“Be honest. Do respect and treat every person as good as I can.”

“I want to be honest and be truth to myself and this society. If I use wrong way to get money, then my next life may be very bad.”

“Create your peace and tranquility; stop creating obstacles for yourself.”

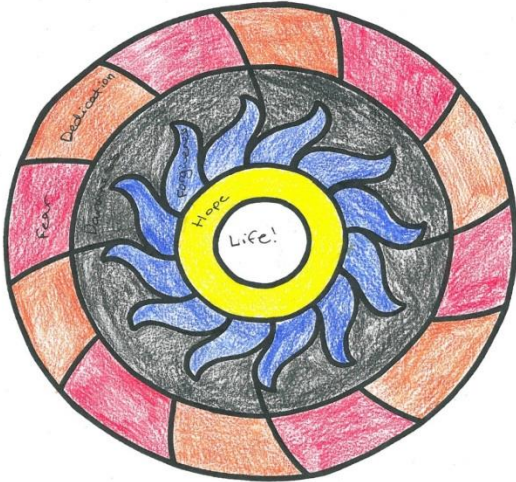
Assignment: “My Life Mandala”

Two themes emerged in students' reflective writing on their mandala assignment: (1) ability to identify resources and steps to reach career goals and (2) ability to reflect on life.



[A student's drawing]

The student wrote the following: “My picture is a symbol of the process I will have to take to get the job that I want. The education, frame of mind, and things I have to do to get to where I want to be with the Apple, Inc.”



[A student’s drawing]

The student wrote the following: “My mandala drawing symbolizes many things—Life, Hope, Forgiveness, Darkness, Fear, and Dedication. Life is the main purpose... Everyone goes through hard times, but with dedication and hardworking, I will achieve my career goals.”

Among the museum objects, apparently the Indian Goddess, Durga, and Shakyamuni Buddha generated the most interest, reflection, and connection for students. Students’ strong association with the Durga stemmed from her power and bravery in conquering demons. In reality, the job search is a difficult and stressful process because students constantly encounter challenges both emotionally and externally. Their internal, emotional challenges are their inner negative voices and lack of self-confidence. The external challenges are the low employment rate and few job openings. The ability to overcome those challenges requires the job seeker to be brave and to have power in facing obstacles.

Four students claimed that they found the museum trip did not contribute to their learning. An accounting student responded that the museum objects are religious and that she could not see any connection to career planning. Her point is well taken because these are religious works of art. However, the final art-making assignment, “My Life Mandala” created a chance for students to study and use the artwork to plan their lives and future careers. Of these students, 95% used the mandala as a planning tool for their careers and life goals, along with a plan of action. One student said, “I suppose it is a drawing only but I never realized that it helped me to set important goals and brainstorm possible ways to achieve them. I spent almost one and half hours to complete the drawing.”

During the last class, the instructor conducted a survey about students’ overall learning experience, which revealed that 90% of the students are favorable to integrating art in a career planning class. Three key learning themes emerged: to choose a job I love but not just money, to be able to discover life’s meaning and purpose, to be more open-minded and see things differently. Only 10% of the students were not favorable to this type of instructional design. The

main reason for their difficulty was not seeing a connection between the works of art and career planning concepts. In the interview sessions, the five students all expressed how helpful and useful the museum trip was. A student said, “The Rubin Museum was a really amazing experience and you learn a lot about the background of the art work. And I think it helps you during your career because their history can help you to see who you really are and what you would look for in a job.” Another student said, “The trip taught me a lot. A big message a lot of people don’t realize is Buddhism isn’t about success in the sense of material things which Buddhism teaches. Success really is being enlightened, being able to let anything material go. It’s just relationships and spirituality. Honestly, at the end of everything, it’s about being happy.” Two important findings from the interview sessions are students’ ability to reflect on life in spiritual level and their constant self-inquiry of who they are and what they want to become.

REFLECTION

“Who am I?” is a question that cannot be answered wholly within a brief 15-week period. However, students can begin inquiring and embarking upon their discovery journey in college. This study should enable the students to expand their understanding of knowing to include self-worth, and character development above and beyond subject comprehension and skills. Therefore, they will be able to make appropriate decisions, set meaningful goals, make plans, and take the best possible actions.

Integrating the arts into classroom teaching can help students focus on interpreting their current life situation, together with their studies, faculty members, and the general college experience. Thus, students should be able to reflect upon their roles in the community and society, and begin to ponder their life purpose. They are expected to plan their future careers and personal lives from a base of self-understanding. Introducing college students to art, such as this unique Himalayan art, can inspire them to seek imagery and symbolism, and more important, the teaching behind each artwork. With hope, students can then apply what they have learned from art to their own lives. Though the duration of change should be long-term, it will require continuous effort on the students’ part to learn, reflect, and take diverse actions in order to reach the epitome of their life goals.

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APPENDIX 1

Museum Visit Booklet

Students need to respond to the following questions:

1. After your museum tour, please identify one work of art and complete the booklet.
Name of your chosen artwork: _____
What do you notice in the work of art?
2. What questions occur to you about the work of art? What are you curious about?
3. Look at the work of art and create a simple drawing of the art here.
4. What is the contextual information of the artwork?
What more do you want to know, and how will you research further?
5. What connections can you make between this work of art and your career planning/job search?
6. Look through all your notes. Circle key ideas for the study of this work of art.
Which of these ideas would resonate with your career planning/job search? List your key ideas here:
7. What art making activities will you do to explore your key ideas?
8. What were your expectations before the museum trip?
Please briefly describe your museum visit experience.

[Note: This booklet is adapted from the Lincoln Center Institute for the Performing Arts, Inc.]

