

The National Creativity Network (NCN): Unleashing Imagination, Creativity and Innovation to Positively Transform Education, Commerce, Culture and Government

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The North American continent has been a venue over thousands of years for human beings, individually and collectively, to unleash their imagination and foster a culture of creativity, invention, and innovation that has transformed local areas, regions, states and provinces, nations, and the world. The story begins with the fertile imaginations of peoples and tribes (Native Americans or First Nations) throughout the continent who created languages, villages, cities, agriculture, systems of barter and trade, alliances, religions, breathtaking works of architecture and art, evocative musical forms, instruments and other technological artifacts, and compelling stories of life and culture for rising generations. Peoples from Europe began to arrive thousands of years later, first in a trickle, then a stream, and finally a river of diversity. The steady influx of further immigrants from East, West, and South over the past few centuries further increased this diversity and infused the creative matrix of North America with a dynamism that has profoundly altered the landscape, human societies, and made this continent a vast mosaic of peoples, ideas, cultures, and socioeconomic systems influencing the entire globe.

While many important and valuable changes to human life and societies have happened as a result of the impact of imagination, creativity, invention, and innovation within North America and elsewhere, not all changes have been positive. One only has to think of the impact of European populations on Native American peoples over the past five centuries. Some changes initially thought to be positive have turned out in the longer run of history to be fraught with difficulties and new challenges. It is our belief that a new wave of imagination can, and indeed must, foster a culture of creativity and innovation that will continue to transform institutions, cultures, and societies in North America in this new century, equaling or exceeding the changes occurring among prior generations. Civic, corporate, educational, and cultural institutions can benefit from rejuvenation at local, regional, and national levels. Education, culture, commerce, and government are four major spheres of human activity where important transformations must occur to adequately prepare for the challenges and opportunities of the future. The National Creativity Network or NCN has been formed to advance this transformational process across the continent of North America working with regional coalitions and national organizations.

The formation of the NCN was informed by already existing efforts in other nations going back a decade or more (mostly in Europe), the work of UNESCO around creative cities and creative industries, and the International Districts of Creativity which formed in Europe (www.districtsofcreativity.org) and has grown to comprise 14 creative districts (regions) around the world, including Creative Oklahoma in the USA. These movements show no signs of abating and the NCN intends to formally link to these movements while focusing on the particular needs of the North American continent.

What Do We Imagine?

We envision a vital and viral network of creative localities, regions, and provinces/states across North America where transformations are already occurring. These are places where people and organizations have started to come together around the themes of imagination, creativity and innovation to make a positive difference in education, culture, commerce and/or government within their spheres of influence. Such work is challenging, frustrating, demanding, invigorating, and rewarding – sometimes all at the same time. We believe that such efforts can learn and share with other like-minded nodes or “hot spots” across the continent and that through such networking efforts the orientations, plans, actions, and effects of all network participants can be strengthened and better sustained. We know that such transformations are long-term processes and will have many facets, projects, and centers of creative and imaginative work. While we all must take actions in the present, we must also embrace a long-term view about the core importance and potentials of our respective and collective work.

On What Do We Agree?

Any collaboration requires some basic agreement as to the focus of the collaboration and its fundamental purposes. Therefore we here declare our commitments, in hopes that they resonate with others who would desire to join the National Creativity Network. We accept the following working definitions for our work, adapted from the book *imagination first* by Scott Noppe-Brandon and Eric Liu (Jossey-Bass, 2009):

Imagination is the capacity to conceive of what is not yet present or manifest.

Creativity is imagination applied (“imagination at work”) to do or make something that flows from the prior capacity to conceive of the new.

Innovation consists of further creative actions that advance the form, depth, reach, and richness of that which has been brought into being.

We believe that imagination is a fundamental primer for human creativity and an essential human and societal resource that is both underdeveloped and underutilized in the present age. The complexities of modern life frequently lead to paralysis at the individual level driven in part by a belief that “I am not an imaginative person” or perhaps worse, “my imaginative ideas cannot make any real difference in the world.” We believe that imagination, creativity, and innovation -- while partially innate and present in virtually all human beings -- can be taught, encouraged, cultivated, and improved over time. Thus we adopt an “I-C-I” framework for our work. While one of the best ways to improve these elements within one’s life is simply to engage in these practices on a regular basis, there are various techniques, tools, guidance, and approaches that can accelerate potential, progress, and impact and further build what David and Tom Kelley call “creative confidence.” The expression of imagination, creativity, and innovation is not limited to any one area of life, such as the arts or other so-called “creative” fields, but can be found in all areas of human endeavor spanning the sciences, humanities, social and behavioral sciences, architecture and the arts, law and political science, religion and theology, engineering, technology, interdisciplinary studies, and so forth.

What Have We Done to Date?

The National Creativity Network was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization in the summer of 2010 and formally launched in November 2010 at the Creativity World Forum in Oklahoma City. The NCN has accomplished a variety of tasks since its inception. These accomplishments include:

- Establishing a **board of directors** drawn from various professions, organizations, and geographic locations with Sir Ken Robinson as Honorary Chair and creating a small headquarters with a full-time Executive Director coming on board in 2013.
- Establishing and maintaining a website (www.nationalcreativitynetwork.org) and **weekly posts and social media transmission of news** (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, email) about imagination, creativity, and innovation efforts across North America and the globe.
- Establishing relationships with **regional coalitions** in twelve (12) US states, four (4) Canadian provinces, and with several tribal nations.
- Organizing and convening panels, discussions, and presentations in forums across North America as well as occasional **webinars** archived on the NCN website.
- Assuming responsibility for the annual **USA Creative Business Cup** whose winner annually competes for the **Global Creative Business Cup** in Copenhagen, Denmark as part of Global Entrepreneurship Week; a contest that has grown to embrace 60 nations.
- Establishing the **Sir Ken Robinson Award for Leadership in Creativity and Innovation** with the inaugural award bestowed upon Susan McCalmont, President of Creative Oklahoma, in November 2013 by Sir Ken Robinson, our honorary board chair.
- Creating and maintaining a working group of the NCN called the **Creative Economy Coalition (CEC)** comprised of individuals from organizations actively seeking to define, measure, and enhance creative industries and creative economies across North America; the CEC holds occasional meetings and monthly conference calls and prepared and released through the NCN website a 141-page initial report on *America's Creative Economy* in August 2013.
- Conceiving and co-founding **Global Creativity United (GCU)** which the Executive Director of the NCN co-chairs. GCU is an international alliance of eight founding organizations with a combined presence in over 150 nations. It seeks to advance positive creativity in all of its varied manifestations in addition to growing creative industries and creative economies. Following a successful inaugural World Summit on Creative Industries organized by the local hosts as part of the 2014 Global Entrepreneurship Congress in Moscow, Russia, the GCU is now the organizer for a **2nd World Summit on Creative Industries** to be held as part of the March 2015 Global Entrepreneurship Congress in Milan, Italy. GCU intends to make the World Summit on Creative Industries an annual global event that celebrates, informs, and advances creative industries and creative economies worldwide.
- Working with the Marconi Center for Creativity in Bologna, Italy and NESTA in the United Kingdom to establish a **Global Creativity Researchers Network** to pioneer new methodologies and the interdisciplinary and rigorous study of creativity.

Will You Join Us?

The creation, support, and encouragement of a National Creativity Network require an unprecedented level of collaboration among groups of like-minded and active organizations and individuals across this continent. We are especially desirous of linking with formal networks of people and multiple organizations that cross government, culture, commerce, and education sectors within specific location(s) that are already active in transforming their respective spheres of influence. We also welcome national and international organizations located in Canada, Mexico, and the United States who will stand with us in endorsing and promoting imagination, creativity, and innovation throughout their respective organizations and supporting in appropriate ways the work of coalitions in communities across North America.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts about this exciting new venture, your current actions, and your future plans. We believe that by sharing our insights, resources, and efforts we will all find deeper reservoirs of strength for the journey ahead of us. We suspect that cross-regional projects within the network will also arise over time that would never have occurred without participation in such a collaborative network. We look forward to hearing from you.

The NCN is an Oklahoma-registered nonprofit with IRS tax exempt status and welcomes funds and in-kind contributions from sponsors to support its efforts. Our website is www.nationalcreativitynetwork.org. The National Creativity Network may be contacted via the office of the Executive Director.

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“Our best hope for the future is to develop a new paradigm of human capacity to meet a new era of human existence. We need to evolve a new appreciation of the importance of nurturing human talent along with an understanding of how human talent expresses itself differently in every individual. We need to create environments – in our schools, in our workplaces, and in our public offices – where every person is inspired to grow creatively . . . because as the world evolves, the very future of our communities and institutions will depend on it.” Sir Ken Robinson, Honorary Chairman of the National Creativity Network in *The Element* (Penguin, 2009)