

Viewpoints

A bridge to a new world helped by man who was given a chance

Top of Utah Voices



Michael Vaughan

■
Commentary

Michael Vaughan is Weber State University's provost. He accepts e-mail from readers at MVAUGHAN@Weber.edu

Pittsburgh community. He also serves on the Board of Trustees for the University of Pittsburgh.

At any given time, there are about 500 students at the Manchester Crafts Guild studying music, photography, painting and ceramics. Like Strickland, these young people come from Pittsburgh's poorest neighborhoods, and their prospects are dim.

By engaging students in the arts, Strickland seeks to open a new world for them — much like his own positive experience years ago.

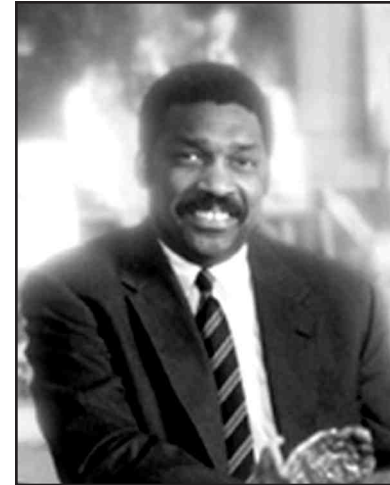
According to Strickland, 90 percent of the students at Manchester will go on to college. In Strickland's opinion, "the arts are a bridge to a new life."

Strickland uses the arts to engage students. Once engaged, the students move on to college and careers as doctors, lawyers and

entrepreneurs. The Manchester program has received national attention. For example, the students became so proficient at recording live performances that Manchester formed its own recording label — MCG Jazz. The label has earned three Grammy awards, and all the label's profits are donated back to the Manchester Crafts Guild.

Strickland has also received his share of recognition. He is one of a handful of people to receive the MacArthur Foundation's Fellows Award, more commonly known as the "Genius Award." The award is given to people who show exceptional creativity, promise for important future achievements and the potential to foster creative work. There are no applications or unsolicited nominations for the MacArthur prize. Individuals don't even know they are being considered. Once selected, the Fellows simply get a phone call and receive a "no strings attached" prize of half a million dollars.

Ogden could learn something from Strickland's experience. The demographics of Ogden and the state of Utah are changing. At the same time, aspirations of the students in our secondary schools are declining. From the end of World War II to the late 1990s, the proportion of young people graduating from high school and the proportion of high school graduates choosing to enter college increased



Bill Strickland

steadily. In recent years, things have changed.

A decade ago, 42 percent of Utah students entering high school went on to attend college. It was expected that someday the majority of Utah high school students would go on to college. That didn't happen. By 2004, the number of high school students going on to college had dropped from 42 percent to 31 percent.

Ten years ago, 94 percent of Utah's students graduated from high school, and Utah took great pride in its high completion rate. In 2004, Utah's high school graduation rate dropped below 90 percent. Utah is now significantly behind national averages for both

high school completion and college attendance. In the last century, many of the improvements in social and economic conditions in the United States were attributed to increasing education levels. It is worrisome that Utah is beginning the 21st century with a significant drop in educational attainment. No society has ever bettered social conditions by reducing the level of education for its citizens. Fewer and fewer young people in Utah graduating from high school and attending college presents a huge problem.

Strickland is traveling around the country looking at possible locations to start programs similar to Manchester's. According to Strickland, Manchester is a "scalable" concept; it can be duplicated.

Strickland has already opened new schools in Ohio and Michigan. Lewis Gale, Dean of the John B. Goddard School of Business & Economics at Weber State University, invited Strickland to Ogden.

As a result of his visit, Strickland said he might be interested in starting a school like the Manchester Crafts Guild in Ogden. The formula that Strickland used in Pittsburgh may not work for Ogden; but then again, it might.

We have a big problem, and it's time to start looking for solutions. Strickland's example could be a starting point.