



# Imagining America

A Postcard From the Volcano (Currently Dormant)

Some of you will recognize my title—it's taken from a Wallace Stevens poem, in which the speaker, feeling the depredations of old age and mortality, wonders whether young people will ever know that the entire look of their world was fashioned by earlier generations. I suppose it can be said that by imagining America in a new way and by trying to give our schools and culture a new look, we too want to do the same. This brief presentation, then, will be a kind of postcard, from the Syracuse volcano, which, through the hard work of many volcanologists, was rendered dormant, at least for the time being. The volcano I speak of represents the pent-up energies of those who would resist the kinds of changes we seek. They have legitimate concerns, and by listening to those concerns and adjusting our language to accommodate them, we turned opponents into reluctant but willing allies as together we fashioned a new tenure policy at Syracuse.

“‘Scholarship In Action’—is that three words or two?” So goes the quip circulated by my skeptical colleagues who were initially opposed to a new initiative to encourage publicly engaged scholarship. In the spring of 2009 Syracuse became one of the first American universities to revise its tenure policy so that faculty who do publicly engaged scholarship will be rewarded for their contributions through the tenure and promotion process, depending of course on the quality of that work. Since her arrival in 2005, Chancellor Nancy Cantor, one of the founding members of Imagining America, has sought a closer, more reciprocal relationship between Syracuse University and the surrounding community, and beyond that the wider world. This is not mere outreach--



inviting the public onto campus and sponsoring community programs and events. It involves the kinds of initiatives I have described in this chapter: developing scholarly projects with the vital needs of the public in mind, and generating research and new knowledge through interaction with the wider community.

I am of course aware that these changes are controversial. Within my own discipline Stanley Fish and others, defending the always-threatened autonomy and professional expertise of the academy, have spoken out loudly against “saving the world” during working hours. Others within and outside the discipline agree with accounts of university corruption like Jennifer Washburn’s *University Inc.*, and Derek Bok’s *Universities in the Marketplace* and fear the encroachment of political power and the profit motive on critical scholarly inquiry. Related fears concern the diminishment of rigorous scholarly standards and the difficulties of assessing public scholarship. Still others, although they support public scholarship and even do it themselves as tenured faculty, despair of the prospects of changing an institution they consider nearly petrified, *especially* when tenure and promotion are concerned, which is crucial if public scholarship is ever given the chance to thrive.

One of the few advantages that accrues to the humanities due to its remoteness from the perceived needs of the corporate world and government agencies is that it has not had to protect itself from undue outside influence. Even during the culture wars of the 1990s, most humanists responded to the conservative onslaught on government support for the arts by advocating continued support at established levels, or even increased support. Only a very few responded by telling the National Endowment for the Arts to take a hike with its money stuffed in its backpack. But for some the prospect of



publicly engaged scholarship raises the specter of meddling by, if not the government, then by the political process, and by the private sector as well.

The changes at Syracuse were four years in the making, and during that process each of the objections mentioned above were debated at length. Indeed, the language of the policy itself reflects an acute awareness that the dangers of undue outside influence and inferior scholarship need to be avoided at all costs. What follows are key passages from the new policy passed by the University Senate, now part of the *Syracuse University Faculty Manual*:

Syracuse University is committed to longstanding traditions of scholarship as well as evolving perspectives on scholarship. Syracuse University recognizes that the role of academia is not static, and that methodologies, topics of interest, and boundaries within and between disciplines change over time. The University will continue to support scholars in all of these traditions, including faculty who choose to participate in publicly engaged scholarship. Publicly engaged scholarship may involve partnerships of university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research, creative activity, and public knowledge; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address and help solve critical social problems; and contribute to the public good.<sup>i</sup>



To allay fears that the policy would encourage inferior scholarship, perhaps in the form of political cant, corporate shilling, advocacy, or narrow pragmatics, the new language goes on to spell out criteria for judging the quality of publicly engaged scholarship:

All scholarship will meet common expectations in terms of 1) ways of doing the work (e.g., formulating problems, choosing topics of inquiry, framing questions, using systematic processes or methods, setting goals, making and carrying out plans, sustaining a scholarly agenda, observing ethical standards); 2) means of legitimating the work (e.g., providing theoretical foundations, making reasoned arguments, documenting the work, representing the work in various media, disseminating it to appropriate audiences and users, assessing outcomes or projects through review by appropriate evaluators); 3) connections to prior/current scholarship and to an intellectual community or communities (e.g., drawing on other scholars' work, contributing to current work, building on a scholar's previous work, placing work in an intellectual tradition); 4) qualities of the work (e.g., rigor, objectivity, caution, currency, originality, generativity, independence of thought, critical stance, commitment); and 5) significance (e.g., audiences addressed, importance of goals, relevance beyond immediate project, effect on field, contribution to the public good).<sup>ii</sup>

These passages, along with several additional ones describing effective scholarship that were proposed by early opponents of the policy, eventually resulted in changes that gained, first, the unanimous support of the Academic Affairs Committee of



the University Senate, which worked on the changes for four years, followed by the unanimous support of the University Senate itself. Initial objections based upon the difficulty of distinguishing scholarship from service, of achieving effective assessment of public scholarship, of including some non-academic evaluation in the process without relinquishing peer review, of “privileging” public over traditional scholarship, and of undermining the University’s mission to produce disinterested, rigorous scholarship—these objections were answered in lengthy conversations and email exchanges that took place on a special blog specifically constructed to facilitate the conversation. The full discussion can be accessed at <http://susenate.wordpress.com/> where readers who care to may inspect responses to a range of articulate, understandable concerns voiced by esteemed colleagues.

Let me describe the process in greater detail. Some four years ago Nancy Cantor came to a meeting of the Academic Affairs Committee of the University Senate (AAC--the AAC was, and continues to be, made up of some 20 faculty representing nearly all schools and colleges on campus, and several administrators, most ex officio—this particular meeting was one of my first as a member) and asked it to consider what it would take to change the culture of the institution in order to encourage faculty to engage in “scholarship in action.” (This is the Chancellor’s umbrella term that describes the institution’s general disposition toward the public and its problems. It is broader than publicly engaged scholarship, which describes a particular mode of scholarly inquiry). Because almost none of the AAC members had any familiarity with the term, Louise Phelps, the Chair, organized the AAC to educate itself as to the meaning of the term, and what the initiative for civic engagement meant at other schools around the country and



for our colleagues at Syracuse University. We then spent over a year collecting and reading the scholarly literature on the subject, but mostly listening to some two dozen of our colleagues, organized into five panels, describe either their publicly engaged scholarly projects in detail or their reservations about the very notion of publicly engaged scholarship (one full panel was devoted to critics and skeptics).

Near the end of this process the Vice-Chancellor began circulating a draft of a document (“Provost’s Statement on Tenure”), which he presented to faculty for its input at numerous “town hall” meetings across campus. He also sought input from chairs, deans, non-tenured faculty, and others. At the request of several faculty members and faculty attending an open meeting of the College of Arts & Sciences Faculty Council to clarify the role of faculty in the process, the chancellor, vice-chancellor and provost, and associate provost all made it very clear that any changes in the tenure policy suggested in the “Provost’s Statement on Tenure” would be vetted through a full collaboration between faculty and administration. Thus for the past year and a half the vice-chancellor and associate provost worked with the AAC to revise the document in an atmosphere of open, collegial discussion and debate. Much of the detailed work on language was done in a Sub.-Ctte., which I chaired. Typically there were 5-7 faculty and one administrator in attendance. All recommendations were brought to the full AAC, (usually made up of 10-15 of the 20 or so members in attendance, including the associate provost or vice-chancellor) for debate, revision, and approval. The discussions included invited faculty members, who weighed in pro and con, and dozens of faculty who responded to the AAC’s repeated calls via email for faculty input.



As a result of these extensive deliberations, much in the original document changed. The proposed changes, then, are the culmination of several years of study and careful consideration by some fifty faculty members representing nearly all units on campus, in collaboration with several administrators. I should add that after her initial request that the AAC explore “Scholarship in Action,” the Chancellor did not actively intervene in the discussions other than, presumably, through the vice-chancellor and associate provost. One colleague made the mistaken claim that the Chancellor and Imagining America, through its Tenure Team Initiative, were the “primary sources of these proposals.” In fact, their roles were quite modest compared with the role of our own faculty, some of whom are certainly aware of Imagining America’s perspectives and share some of them.

As I argued at the time, as a founder and a leader of Imaging America, Nancy Cantor’s views are consistent with its agenda. But contrary to the false claim of excessive influence over a supine faculty, Imaging America is a national, professional consortium of some 75 colleges and universities that is organizationally distinct from Syracuse University and certainly from the AAC. Thus, for instance, Imaging America was not “brought to campus by Nancy Cantor,” as a colleague maintained. In fact a number of other administrators and many members of the faculty supported the move and actively lobbied the organization to move to Syracuse (it was considering several schools). No doubt Nancy Cantor played an important role in convincing the organization’s National Board to relocate here, but others were decisive in influencing the organization’s final decision. Without this support, Imagining America would very likely not have come to Syracuse. Once at Syracuse, Imagining America did not actively intervene in our



process. At the time I explained that Tim Eatman, Assistant Professor in the School of Education, was a member of Imagining America and a leader of its Tenure Team Initiative—he served on the AAC. And I acknowledged that I had participated in Imagining America events (I helped organize the 2007 National Conference held at Syracuse and I put together a panel of our colleagues at that conference). But the proposed changes to the *Faculty Manual*, I pointed out, contained language and priorities of our own making, in response to the needs of our institution. In fact, the definition of publicly engaged scholarship, and the criteria for judging all scholarship contained in the proposed changes are revised versions of language produced by, respectively, the Committee on Engagement, a Consortium of Big Ten Schools and the University of Chicago, and our own Louise Phelps. I stated at the time that the perspective of at least one opponent badly underestimated the degree to which the proposed changes were the result of the steady, independent work of his own colleagues right at Syracuse University.

I hope this gives you some small sense of the arguments, obstacles, and fears we faced, and others will no doubt face, in making the changes recommended by the TTI Report. I end with the opening lines of Stevens’ memorable poem: “Children picking up our bones / Will never know that these were once / As quick as foxes on the hill.”

Harvey Teres

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<sup>i</sup> The language is based upon that of the Committee on Engagement, itself part of the Committee on Institutional Cooperation, a consortium that includes the schools of the Big Ten and the University of Chicago.

<sup>ii</sup> Based upon Louise Phelps, “Learning about Scholarship in Action in Concept and Practice: A White Paper,” Academic Affairs Committee of the University Senate, Syracuse University, August, 2007