Imagining America’s arrival at Syracuse University in 2007 coincided with the university’s concerted effort to engage its intellectual and creative resources in partnership with the city and region. Under the leadership of then-Chancellor Nancy Cantor, faculty, students, and staff embraced Scholarship in Action as a framework for teaching and learning that sought to animate knowledge in transformative ways. IA represented one key initiative of the university’s new emphasis on civic engagement, and it catalyzed a number of projects intended to support community-campus partnerships and to demonstrate the power of the arts, humanities, and design within such projects.

During its tenure at SU, IA has provided over 30 faculty grants to support campus-community research, scholarship, and pedagogy. These grants have sponsored a broad range of publicly oriented projects, including the exploration and design of urban food systems, the student-led design and construction of an art and literacy community center, and an archival research project intended to heighten public awareness of the African-American community’s cultural, entrepreneurial, political, religious, and social roots in Syracuse.

Staff members Dr. Jan Cohen-Cruz, Dr. Timothy Eatman, and Dr. Kevin Bott each taught undergraduate and graduate courses on community-based art and engaged pedagogy. The Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) formed the first regional chapter on SU’s campus, bringing together over a hundred graduate artists and scholars for professional development opportunities, including 5 regional PAGE conferences. IA also co-founded the SU Engagement Fellows program, through which graduating seniors receive tuition scholarships to begin graduate studies in the areas of engaged arts, humanities, and design, while at the same time undertaking internships within civic and cultural organizations in Central New York. To date, IA has supported seven cohorts of Engagement Fellows – a total of 80 students.

The IA national office also partnered with local and regional stakeholders to create engaged art and scholarship. From 2011-2015, The D.R.E.A.M. Freedom Revival was a singular campus-community performance project that stimulated local conversations on important civic issues. Beginning in 2015, in partnership with a local, city-run community center, IA is supporting A Ritual for Return, an arts and humanities-based project intervening in the issues of incarceration and prisoner reentry. In both 2007 and 2013, the city of Syracuse and Syracuse University hosted IA’s national conference, bringing nearly 1,000 people to community organizations in the city of Syracuse and the SU campus.

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