

History of PAGE

A story of organizational catalysts and institutional intermediaries

By Julie Ellison and Sylvia Gale

When IA launched in 1999, the national conversation about the state of higher education included deep concern for the future of graduate education, especially in the humanities—in large part a result of the acute job crisis. In 1990, the Mellon Foundation launched grants to ten universities to support PhDs (time to degree). This was accompanied by the call for “fewer PhD programs” in the humanities. Sidonie Smith (U Michigan), a defender of regional doctoral education and broad PhD opportunities emerged as one of the few counter-voices. As conversations about graduate education proliferated, there was very little room in these conversations for input from graduate students. As IA’s Founding Director Julie Ellison remembers, “I went to a lot of meetings about humanities graduate education. All of these meetings were about graduate students, and there were virtually no graduate students in the room. Those that were present were not welcomed as peer leaders.”

Meanwhile, several programs devoted to fostering broad opportunities for graduate students, linking graduate education with public application and innovation, were emerging around the country. These included the Preparing Future Faculty initiative, a partnership between the AACU and the Council of Graduate Schools; Humanities Out There, founded by Julia Reinhard Lupton at UC Irvine; UT-Austin’s Professional Development and Community Engagement program, directed by Tommy Darwin out of the graduate dean’s office, with links to UT’s (now UT-system-wide) Intellectual Entrepreneurship Program led by Rick Cherwitz. In 1998, when David Scobey at U of Michigan founded the Arts of Citizenship program as part of UM’s Year of Humanities and Arts (YOHA), the program’s vision of promoting sustainable campus-community collaborations in the arts and culture sector included grad students, alongside faculty, undergraduates, and community partners. In 2003, the Public Humanities Institute of the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington, the brainchild of Kathleen Woodward (IA’s founding board chair) offered an annual program that supported the goals and aspirations of early career publicly engaged scholars in the humanities and related fields.

With the launch of IA, Ellison, Scobey, and IA’s first Associate Director, Dr. Kristin Hass, who were simultaneously exploring new models for engaged graduate teaching, knew that attention to graduate education and the involvement of graduate students in shaping the conversation about the role of public cultural practice and the future of higher education were critical to the emerging consortium. Michigan doctoral student Erica Lehrer, who had connected to the Year of Humanities and Arts and Arts of Citizenship at UM, served as observer/documentarian at the first Imagining America conference, which was held at UM in 2002. Lehrer also assessed two

important documents about graduate education on IA's behalf: a 1999 Council of Graduate Schools Survey on Graduate Certificate Programs, and the WWNFF report on "The Responsive PhD," then emerging as a national initiative under WWNFF President (and crucial early IA supporter) Robert Weisbuch.

After discussion and approval by the IA national advisory board and funding commitments from the board, in 2003 Graduate Student Dana Walker at U Michigan School of Information worked on implementing plans for IA's graduate education network, titled Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE). An early invitation letter, drafted by Walker, explained PAGE's intentions, limitations, and scope: "The purpose of this new graduate network, supported by Imagining America, is to both inspire and inform graduate students interested in pursuing public and community practice through the humanities, arts, and design. Because of the inevitable fiscal constraints, PAGE is a modest enterprise. But the goal--of building a national alliance dedicated to taking seriously the public capacity of graduate students in the cultural disciplines--is an ambitious one."

At the IA conference in 2003, held at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the nascent PAGE network got a jumpstart when UT-Austin graduate student Sylvia Gale, participating at the invitation of UT's Professional Development and Community Engagement program and one of only a few graduate students in attendance at the conference, used her allotted time on a panel intended to highlight graduate student leaders in the areas of public engagement and public culture-making to ask the obvious: Where was the graduate voice in this conversation? What were students actually doing in the field, and what might they have to say about their own professional preparation? How far would conversations about "transforming" higher education go without participation from the newest and soon-to-be faculty members?

After Gale's presentation, Ellison approached her immediately and asked if she would be willing to undertake leadership of the PAGE initiative, already imagined by IA as central to the organization's mission but not yet mobilized in earnest. Over the next year, with Julie Ellison's support, Gale laid the groundwork for the PAGE Fellows program, initially envisioned as a vehicle for getting more graduate students to the conference and for making them a visible and audible presence once there. Each year since, due to the dynamic participation and critical feedback from each new cohort of Fellows, PAGE's role at the conferences and between conferences has grown.

In 2008, Gale completed her doctoral program and resigned her position as PAGE director, soon moving into active membership in IA's research group on assessing the practices of public scholarship (APPS). Former PAGE Fellow Kevin Bott became the program's second director in May 2008. Lisa Thornhill and Adam Bush were named Associate Director and Assistant Director, respectively. These positions were created in response to the expanding PAGE network and the increasingly complicated logistics of organizing year-round PAGE activities. Bott, Thornhill, and Bush worked to expand the national network; developing a dynamic web presence that connects graduate students and early-career scholars engaged in public scholarship; creating funding opportunities for publicly engaged research at the graduate and post-doc level; and supporting IA by assisting with regional meeting administration and by strengthening the national consortium through campus PAGE participation.

In 2009, Adam Bush became director of PAGE, immediately pushing the network's leadership structure towards greater collaboration. At the start of its second decade, PAGE reframed itself as a peer network organized not by an individual director, but instead by a rotating cohort of PAGE alumni who share responsibility for mentoring and designing support structures for the new cohort of fellows. IA supports PAGE with an annual budget, but the co-directors and each year's fellows determine together how those funds are spent. PAGE has used its funding to host monthly peer-designed webinars and virtual dinner parties, to support fellows as they visit one another's campuses, and to fund the co-creation of scholarly artifacts.