

America *Imagining*

Artists and
Scholars in
Public Life

Imagining America

The End of the Beginning:
Report on the First Two Years

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Let us live up to the ideals of our democratic way of life by placing the arts and humanities front and center in the ongoing effort to make America a more perfect union

—First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton at the University of Michigan

Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life

The End of the Beginning: Report on the First Two Years

Summary of the Report

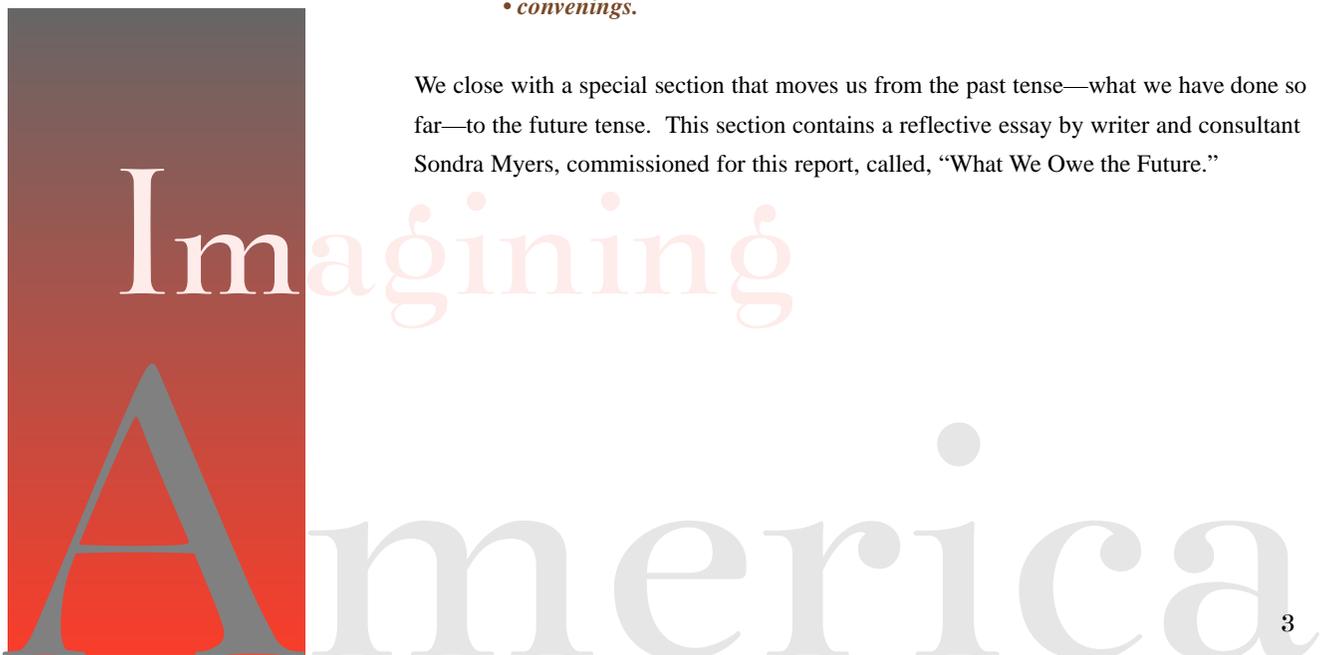
Imagining America is a national consortium of colleges, universities, and cultural institutions dedicated to putting cultural work in the public interest at the heart of American higher education. Founded in 1999, Imagining America fosters the development of sustainable collaborations between higher education and the public or non-profit cultural sector. The founding partners of Imagining America are the University of Michigan, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, and the White House Millennium Council.

Citizens are doing the work of the public arts and humanities in the belief that inspiration has real effects on individuals, institutions, and communities. Imagining America aims to focus the energies of higher education on helping to realize that belief.

This report traces Imagining America's first phase, from brainstorming at our inaugural White House conference in March 1999 to presentations on successfully completed projects at our national conference in November 2000. We describe our progress in four areas:

- *leadership*
- *collaboration*
- *communications*
- *convenings.*

We close with a special section that moves us from the past tense—what we have done so far—to the future tense. This section contains a reflective essay by writer and consultant Sondra Myers, commissioned for this report, called, “What We Owe the Future.”



Mission for a New Millennium: A Letter of Introduction

Dear Friends,

Inspired by a common vision of public scholarship and the arts of citizenship, our three organizations came together two years ago to explore how we might turn a good idea into a better reality. Our goals: to launch a national initiative that would make visible and more vibrant the work taking place all across America at the boundary between campus and community.

Our own first-hand experiences with creative projects that successfully joined university humanists, artists, and designers with their dynamic community counterparts provided a foundation for our conviction. But until we gathered colleagues from the academic, government, and non-profit spheres at the White House in March 1999, we remained uncertain about the level of activity and the level of interest.

As University of Michigan Professor Julie Ellison, now director of Imagining America, observes, “The true dimensions of campus-community border-crossing work were unseen, because each project, each collaboration was unto itself. Universities have been taking civic engagement more seriously and, with communities, have been developing the cultural programs and centers needed to support new commitments. But individual projects were hard to see as parts of a possible whole.” What had been missing was a national network of people and institutions working at the intersection of higher education and community life.

Today, just two years after forming Imagining America, a network is in place and growing. The following pages outline the first two years of Imagining America. It is easy to get caught up in day-to-day tasks and forget what brought us together. At this turning point, as we move through 2001 with an expanding agenda, we thought it would be wise to remind ourselves and our collaborators of Imagining America’s reason for being and its history so far.

In the “vision piece” of this report, Sondra Myers provides us with a touchstone for the future, as well:

The local community must be the microcosm of our pluralistic, inclusive democracy, and the realization of our democratic ideals. Community is, in fact, democracy incarnate, where culture is woven into the fabric of our daily lives, not worn as a decoration on its surface, or observed from afar as the province of the privileged few.

At this millennial moment, Myers remind us, “creativity should be the very signature of this nation. Through meaningful cultural work connecting our communities and our campuses, we can begin to move beyond imagining a better America and toward creating it. It is what we owe the future.”

Lee C. Bollinger

President, University of Michigan

Ellen McCullough-Lovell

Deputy Assistant to the President and Advisor to the First Lady on the Millennium

Robert Weisbuch

President, Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation

I found the single most important thing in two institutions that I've worked with in the last fifteen years is the leadership from the President's Office.

—Anne Whiston Spirn, White House conference, March 1999

I. Engaging Leadership

To ensure that Imagining America would go forward with leadership consensus, its 21 founding college and university presidents established the Presidents Council. The goal of the Presidents Council is to affirm the practical importance of culture-making for American communities. In April 3, 2000, the Council declared its goal of promoting engagement through the arts, humanities, and design on its own campuses, in its surrounding regions, and across the nation.

In order to realize these goals, the Presidents Council issued a declaration of principles, and plans. The Council will:

- *foster new networks connecting higher education, K-12 schools, state arts and humanities councils, and the non-profit cultural sector regionally and nationally;*
- *Support concrete, long-term ways of supporting and rewarding faculty in the arts, humanities and design who are involved in community projects; and*
- *Provide a forum for the ongoing evaluation of public engagement through the cultural disciplines in American colleges and universities.*

To demonstrate their commitment to this vision of cultural engagement—as well as the need for an organization such as Imagining America—19 of the colleges and universities identified existing projects and programs on their campuses that support the mission of Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life. Each designated an important campus-based program that expands public and community engagement through the arts and humanities. The total commitment by these Presidents Council institutions comes to more than \$1 million per year. We expect the Presidents Council to grow significantly as we find more and more university leaders that are committed to public engagement through the cultural disciplines.

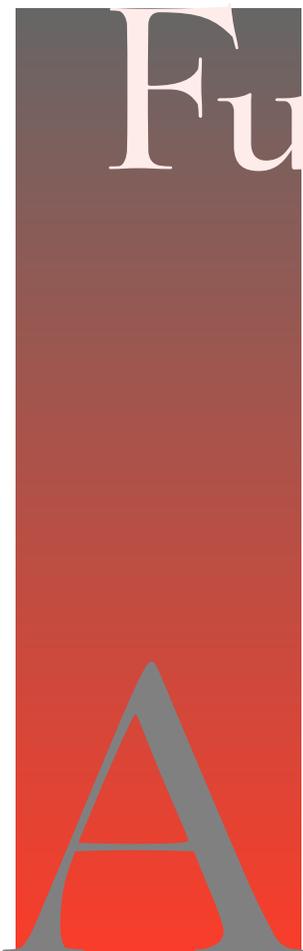
Five Examples of the Demonstrations of Commitment by Presidents Council institutions, November 2000

California Institute for the Arts: The Digital Arts Network Program

Digital Arts Network (DAN) will link 10 community-based arts organizations with free after-school arts programs in diverse Los Angeles neighborhoods. DAN will provide digital labs to these centers supported by CalArts faculty and students. Inner-city youth in these programs will be linked to each other and to CalArts via the internet and computer video teleconferencing systems.

The University of Hartford: Hartt School of Music Community Division Programs

The Community Division of the Hartt School is expanding into a proposed new facility, a performing arts education center. The Hartt School plays a key role in the development of a new public magnet school on campus, serving Hartford and nearby towns. 360 K-5 students will attend the new magnet school, grounded in the theory of multiple intelligences.



University of Pennsylvania: African American Culture and Literacy Project

The African American Culture and Literacy Project, under the direction of Professor of Linguistics Bill Labov, integrates University of Pennsylvania courses, research, teaching, and volunteer programs to help improve the reading and literacy levels of students attending public schools in Penn's local community of West Philadelphia.

University of Washington: Simpson Center for the Humanities Programs

The Simpson Center for the Humanities and Seattle Arts & Lectures have developed two successful programs that bring the community and the university together: the Wednesday University—non-credit courses open to the public—and UW's *Teachers as Scholars*, an ambitious series of seminars in the humanities for K-12 teachers. UW humanities faculty teach both programs.

Yale University: Creative Capitol in New Haven

Creative Capitol in New Haven brings together five campus-community collaborations. Participating Yale programs include: the Yale School of Drama Dwight/Edgewood Project; the Yale School of Music Co-Operative Arts and Humanities Magnet High School Partnership; the Yale Art Gallery Urban-Suburban Exchanges; Yale Center for British Art Public Education Program; and the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute.

For the full listing of the demonstration projects at Presidents Council Institutions, log on to www.ia.umich.edu

“Leaders at universities and cultural institutions must step forward and play an active role in making the knowledge and insight of the humanities a more consistent part of public life... guaranteeing access to the humanities, making them widely available to people of all ages and backgrounds is more critical than ever. A commitment to democracy calls for nothing less.”

Richard J. Franke, “Democratic Vistas for the Humanities,” keynote address, Imagining America National Conference, November 2001

“How about this for an alternative future? How about cultural institutions and community organizations and academia in such cooperative enterprise that they lose their boundaries?”

—Robert Weisbuch, President,
Woodrow Wilson National
Fellowship Foundation

II. Encouraging Collaborations

Woodrow Wilson's Public Scholarship Grants

Funding is critical for lasting partnerships between university and community collaborators. Without funding, many promising projects never get started or fade away after a semester or two. This is why one of the first items on Imagining America's agenda was the creation of a grant program to inspire support from colleges and universities, as well as public and community-based funders.

By creating the Imagining America Public Scholarship Grants, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation is helping to “prime the pump.” In 1999 Woodrow Wilson awarded seven \$5,000 grants to support public scholarship in the arts and humanities. In 2000, through the support of the Rockefeller Foundation, seven more projects received support through the Public Scholarship grant program.

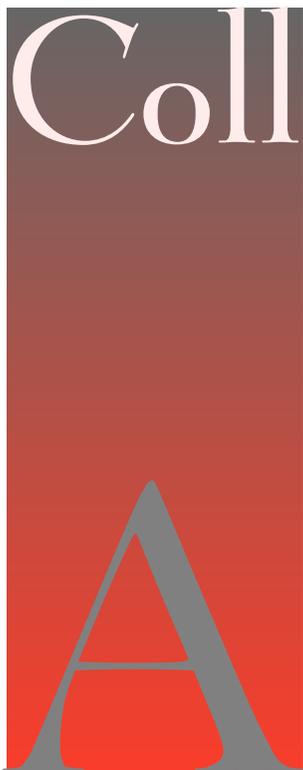
WWNFF President Bob Weisbuch believes passionately that K-12 teachers are among our most important humanities scholars and that doctoral students in the humanities can lead the way in applying their learning to real-world community problems. Under his leadership, Woodrow Wilson has fostered Teachers as Scholars programs that bring high school teachers and faculty scholars together on campuses across the country. Conversely, Woodrow Wilson's Humanities at Work Practicum grants enable doctoral students in the humanities to pursue community projects off campus.

“The project is the building block of collaborative cultural undertakings,” observes Julie Ellison, director of Imagining America. “The project connects people from diverse settings who, in the process of working together, create their own complicated, hard-won network. **The best projects create further, revised relationships because new vistas of possible work open up.** When one project yields another, and then another, we know that the collaborators have not burned out. They have achieved sustainability.”

The initial Imagining America Public Scholarship Grant projects bring Ellison's words to life. Six project teams showcased their achievements at Imagining America's national conference in Chicago. As community and university partners told stories about how they forged successful collaborations, Imagining America ceased to be an idea and became an arena of vivid shared experience. These are a handful of extraordinary alliances that represent only a fraction of the many similar experiments being launched around the country.

Partnerships Don't Just Happen: Public Scholarship Grants, Round One

In Chicago, Lynn Bader-Gregory, producer and director at WNED TV, and Debra More, producer at Azar and More, Inc., talked about the **documentary** they are crafting with faculty at the State University of New York at Buffalo on the **1901 Pan American Exposition**. While enthralled by the work, these collaborators were blunt about the challenges they face and about Imagining America's role in empowering them to undertake a different kind of project. More pointed to the risks of campus-community partnerships. “Our project is highly subjective and it makes it virtually impossible to agree to a common aesthetic in what we're doing. Producing a documentary through a civic partnership is like expecting a dozen sculptors to work together on a mound of clay. The results are unpredictable.” More stressed that “there's plenty of fear to overcome... fear that one nonprofit will steal donors...from the other...fear that one group will embarrass the other by doing or not doing something...fear that we can't meet expectations.” And she made it very clear that the Public Scholarship Grant “[made] this civic partnership happen” and “created a context within which we could start thinking about ways to collaborate in a community that sometimes has difficulties in collaborating.”



Brenda Cotto-Escalara, Professor of Theater at MIT, and Abe Rybeck, Director of the Theater Offensive, spoke about the literal and figurative mapping of terrain that their work with the Theater Offensive requires. In writing and producing *Immaculate Infection: Performing AIDS at the Crossroads of Cultural Difference*, a play about AIDS in Boston's Latino Community, they brought together two communities struggling with AIDS and divided by the problem of gay white men transforming Latino neighborhoods. Cotto-Escalara said, "gentrification is a problem and we are dealing with the two opposite faces of the gentrification issue and trying to put them together in a theater to talk about AIDS." She stressed the importance of sustained collaborations and the linked importance of understanding about how both university and community institutions work. Cotto-Escalara reflected that, perhaps because of the ambitious nature of their work, they learned "important lessons about how an institution like MIT can work with community organizations that are not permanent and that are in crisis." Despite the obvious value of this work they found themselves in surprisingly uncharted terrain. She said, with pride, that their "greatest accomplishment was to start formulating the questions for this kind of interaction."

Dr. Pearl Simpson spoke eloquently about the vibrant Black Bottom community that the University of Pennsylvania displaced and replaced, in her words, "for a restaurant or for a shop." She said that in the midst of the enduring grief and anguish of this site of urban renewal the **Black Bottom Project** was a "way to heal, to help...and not just a Band-Aid." Initially, the Project created a full-length play based on the history of the neighborhood and performed by former residents of the Black Bottom, University City High School students, and Penn students and faculty. They are now working on another play. For her the great value in the project was in keeping the stories of the neighborhood alive—in the community and in the university. As she said, "If you were, you were and if you are, you are and you deserve to be heard." For her collaborator, Billy Yalowitz of Penn, the gift that this work gave him and his students was a lesson in community. He spoke of the strength of the Black Bottom community and said he and his students "drank very deeply at the well of forming these relationships with Pearl and her peers... learning what loyalty is, how you build relationships over time."

"We need ongoingness, we need refreshment, we need more people to take the place of those who go on to the great beyond because it's very important for everybody to know their history, regardless of how small or how minute the place.... Some people want reparations, some people want recognition, and everybody wants respect."

—Dr. Pearl Simpson, Black Bottom Association, Philadelphia

Complex Multi-Partner Collaborations: Public Scholarship Grants, Round Two

The first round of projects paved the way for those funded in the second round, announced in January 2001.

While these seven projects are wildly different—a public arts project commemorating the Lewis and Clark exposition, an on-line archive for cultural conversation, and a film and curriculum exploring the ethical concerns surrounding the sequencing of the human genome—they share important common elements. They are all complicated multi-partner collaborations. They emphasize diversity. They involve cross-generational project teams. And they are concerned with place. A few of them also involve new university interdisciplinary initiatives in emerging fields such as the life sciences and public art.

Perhaps most pervasively, they share a commitment to public engagement imagined not as university “outreach” or “service,” but as a series of complex, textured exchanges. All of these projects emerge from needs in communities and needs in universities.

Our Lady of the Lake University in Texas a weeklong **poetry festival focusing on Latino poets** involves a teaching university, a middle school, a high school, and a public library in the project of engendering a community culture that values Latino literary figures. Similarly, “**Art Matters Too!**” brings **Rutgers University students and faculty into a public school’s after-school program to explore dance, drama, percussion, and visual arts**. The students present their work at a “Community Gala” held at Rutgers. The kids in this program are asked to see themselves as artists and to see the university as theirs. And “**Up from the Streets**” brings the **Detroit Public Schools and Wayne State University into a collaboration that will celebrate the city’s tercentenary** with exhibits of middle and high school students’ artwork.

Giving voice to people who have discovered common concerns is a powerfully felt mutual need that emerges from these projects. At NYU, faculty want to imbue students with a sense of the civic role that professionals can play: **community gardeners, linked through NYU performers and the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance**, want to raise public awareness of the ever-decreasing green space in the city. Together these collaborators give voice to community-garden organizations and a discernable shape to civic involvement. At the University of Washington students and faculty work with the Washington State Parks Department to conceptualize and develop a model of a **public sculpture commemorating the Lewis and Clark expedition**. The Parks Department and the students and faculty must puzzle through the highly charged memory-making process together. The students and faculty get to ply their trade on public turf, and the Parks Department enriches and complicates the commemoration of Lewis and Clark with the scholarly tools their partners bring with them.

Information on these projects and dozens more can be found on the web at www.ia.umich.edu and www.woodrow.org/imagining-america

III. Communications: Building the Network,

In hundreds of local settings, the arts and humanities are becoming visible, audible, and approachable. But a team of artists and humanists improvising a public project in Buffalo usually does not know that a group in New Brunswick or Brooklyn is trying to accomplish something similar. The world of campus-community partnerships is decentralized.

Collaboration invents itself in myriad localities and regions. Imagining America unifies this dispersed activity by documenting and celebrating such experiments, and by forging a movement out of the people who are undertaking them.

Imagining America, above all, is about new paths of communication. Communication is the single most important thing that we do. Participants are making a common culture through conferences, workshops, newsletters, and the Internet.

Through our communications resources and our conference activities, we want to introduce people to Imagining America who are interested in crossing the campus-community divide through public work in the arts, humanities, and design. To date, here is how people, projects, and institutions have joined Imagining America:

- *Colleges and universities have joined Imagining America when the president joined the Presidents Council, by invitation of the Council chair, President Lee C. Bollinger of the University of Michigan. In future, colleges and universities will join Imagining America as members of a formal consortium supporting the work of the national network. To date, membership has been free. Henceforth, institutional membership fees will support the work of the consortium.*

- *Foundations, associations, and other organizations became strategic partners of Imagining America through specific collaborations. The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, our founding partner, led the way with conference co-sponsorship and the Public Scholarship Grant Program. The Federation of State Humanities Councils and the National Association of State Arts Agencies partnered with Imagining America to create the on-line resource, Imagining Your State.*

- *Project teams and individuals have connected to Imagining America through the Woodrow Wilson Public Scholarship Grant program, through the network of state humanities and arts councils, in response to our printed and web materials, and as conference participants. In future, collaborators on campus-community projects can enter information about their work on Imagining America's new database-driven web site.*

- *The benefits of membership include: entry of projects and programs in a searchable database on the web, coverage in newsletters and other publications; subscription to our working papers series, "Foreseeable Futures"; conference participation; consulting services on program development and assessment; and opportunities for hosting collaborative national or regional conferences and for conference co-sponsorship.*

Spreading the Word

All of Imagining America's communications programs aim to:

- *capture the actual experience of campus-community teams working to create 'public goods' in the arts and humanities;*
- *help people interpret their own experiences of community engagement, thus strengthening the vision and skills of artists and humanists in diverse settings;*
- *recruit more faculty in the arts and humanities to civic engagement activities, enriching professional education in those fields that have no tradition of training in project-based collaborative work off-campus;*
- *provide informational, organizational, promotional, and instructional resources to local project teams nationwide;*
- *convey Imagining America's mission to higher education faculty and administrators; to artists and humanists in K-12 schools and other community organizations; to cultural agencies and non-profits; and to funders.*

The Web

Since Imagining America has a web-like, intensively cross-referenced structure—connecting people, activities, organizations, and communities—our web site is fundamental. The web is our primary means of making available intellectual resources for our virtual community of institutions and individuals, and offers the best way to track the national movement of cultural engagement in higher education. Our web site currently includes:

- *About Imagining America: mission, history, administration, partners*
- *Imagining Your State: A Toolkit for State Cultural Caucuses*
- *100+ Best Practices, many with web links*
- *conference programs and transcripts*
- *newsletter*
- *information for potential contributors*

As our capacity grows, we will be able to offer members more and better services. We are starting in summer 2001 with a truly interactive and database-driven website. Members of our network will now be able to share detailed information about their projects and programs. The new site will make it possible for project teams to provide quantitative and qualitative information about their activities, 'narratives and numbers.' An interactive web site will foster contacts among network members and help our office respond to queries and requests more quickly. Users of the site will be able to offer their own expertise and benefit from the expertise of others. For more on Imagining Your State, a web tool kit for developing state cultural caucuses, read on.

You know, the engaged institution is one in which we don't go into a community and come up with what they should do. We come together to collaboratively design the program; we collaboratively determine what it is, how we are going to evaluate those programs, and then we do those programs together.

—Jim Stukel, president of the University of Illinois, speaking at Imagining America inaugural White House conference

IV. Face to Face: Conferences and Conversations

Imagining America's most important communications occur when we bring people into the same room together, speaking face to face.

Imagining America's inaugural White House conference produced collective support for a community of action made up of faculty artists, scholars and community cultural leaders. Conference attendees testified to the importance of civic work. They also proclaimed the importance of the gathering where that testimony was uttered and heard.

Face-to-face gatherings are education at its best. We need to practice communicating about our public work with one another. Imagining America is not simple. It is the arts and humanities and design and planning and architecture. It is communities and universities of different kinds. It is foundations. It is K-12. Indeed, it is a little baroque in its logic. But this sort of lived interdisciplinary, this scrambling together of practices, really is the point.

We all need practice talking because conversation is the currency of engagement. That is why we need more powerful group sessions where social learning among cultural professionals can occur. Imagining America is the switchboard in this operation.

Inaugural Conference

Imagining America was launched at a White House conference in March 1999 at the initiative of the White House Millennium Council, the University of Michigan, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation.

Government leaders joined scholars and artists, university presidents, foundation representatives, and the heads of nonprofit cultural organizations for a day of debate, show-and-tell, and brainstorming.

The conference yielded three messages about what people engaged in campus-community cultural partnerships want and need—messages that continue to guide Imagining America's growth.

First, participants said, they wanted direct support for new kinds of collaborative cultural work. This wish was fulfilled—on a modest scale—at once. At the end of the day, Robert Weisbuch announced unprecedented Woodrow Wilson support for a new grant program—the Imagining America Public Scholarship Grants.

Second, attendees were eager to build a national network of artists and humanists involved in campus-community partnerships. The purpose of the network would be to share expertise gained through hands-on public work at the local level and to talk concretely about how to do more and better work of this kind. This recommendation contained the seed of Imagining America's communications and conference strategies.

Third, participants sought to make public cultural work legitimate within the professional economy of the university. This final goal has been addressed through the work of the Presidents Council and through partnerships with disciplinary organizations.



State Cultural Caucuses Step One: Imagining Michigan Launched

On April 3, 2000, a small group of educational, cultural, and civic leaders came together in Ann Arbor for “Imagining Michigan,” the first annual Michigan Cultural Caucus.

What is a state cultural caucus? It is a cultural leadership network. It is a community of arts, humanities, and higher education leaders who commit to working together. Networks need gatherings, so we proceeded to gather. Our goals were: to agree in principle; develop relationships; discover the common work of public culture; and figure out how to keep collaborating.

Co-sponsored by the University of Michigan, the Michigan Council for the Humanities, and the Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs, the caucus was modeled on similar efforts in other states to forge new partnerships between the public arts and humanities and higher education. Michigan Governor John Engler was honorary chair. Jonathan Katz, president of the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies, and Gail Leftwich, president of the Federation of State Humanities Councils, attended. President Lee Bollinger of the University of Michigan presided. Participants explored opportunities for future collaborations while discovering how many Michigan scholars and artists were already working across campus-community lines.

The meeting ended with considerable exuberance and tentative plans to move forward on a set of statewide initiatives. Face-to-face brainstorming yielded new working relationships and new projects. It has taken the better part of a year for follow-up conversations to yield a clear plan for a second caucus, which will take place in September 2001 at Michigan State University’s Center for Great Lakes Culture.

Step Two: Imagining Your State, A New Web Resource for State Caucuses

We were inspired by the energy stirred up by Imagining Michigan, and by the impact of forums with similar aims in Georgia, Wisconsin, and Oklahoma. Working with the National Assembly of State Arts Agencies (NASAA) and with the Federation of State Humanities Councils (FSHC), we developed a new initiative focused on the states, where a pre-existing structure of arts and humanities councils and of public universities already exists.

The resulting program, **Imagining Your State, supports the growth of campus-community networks through a resource packet or tool kit.** This outlines a flexible model for cultural caucuses in each state aimed at bringing together the arts agency, the humanities council, and the higher education community. The point of such cooperation in every case is to strengthen citizenship and learning through the arts and humanities in ways suited to each region.

Imagining America, NASAA, and FSHC created the web tool kit for building regional campus-community networks, which debuted in November 2000. It articulates goals, presents sample participant lists, concrete examples of successful convenings, thoughtful “briefs,” and helpful web sites. Most importantly, it invites input from humanities and arts councils and universities around the country.

According to NASAA President Jonathan Katz, a state cultural caucus based on Imagining Your State can play several key roles:

- *Articulator of vision and mission*
- *Builder of partnerships*
- *Broker of knowledge*
- *Advocate*

Early reactions from the field suggest that *Imagining Your State* will truly be a work in progress. Within weeks of posting the tool kit, we heard from groups in Wisconsin, Iowa, and Pennsylvania who are adapting the model to their specific—and quite different—needs.

The American Studies Association National Convention: Detroit, October 2000

Imagining America was highlighted at the national convention of the American Studies Association (ASA) in Detroit. The Convention drew 2,000 scholars and students to the city. Working with community partners, ASA's local Program Committee integrated the interests of the host city with the intellectual work of ASA members. In the process, they **helped invent a new model for the annual meetings of scholarly associations in the cultural disciplines.**

ASA introduced new kinds of events and programs, starting with pre-convention and community-based workshops involving ASA members and local organizations. *Imagining America's* Associate Director Kristin Hass chaired a panel on campus-community projects entitled "American Studies as Public Work." Julie Ellison, director of IA, joined a plenary session responding to an address by William Ferris, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities. And *Imagining America* co-sponsored a "community commons" at the Detroit Institute of Art and a cultural celebration at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History. A poetry reading was followed by a dance performance by the convention's Artist-in-Residence, Jawole Willa Joe Zollar, founder of the Urban Bush Women dance company.

At the IA conference in Chicago in November 2000, ASA president Michael Frisch spoke of the success of these efforts to breathe life into the long unchanged model of academic conferences. These collaborations inspired him to think about the promise for the disciplines in making public engagement a regular part of the annual meetings. He said, "the annual meeting could become itself a zone of experimentation in new relationships and new ways of sharing work." He suggested that "one of the major opportunities ... is to transform normal business rather than just [tack on] an additive function... to really ventilate and hopefully transform some of what passes for scholarly discourse itself."

The Humanities and Engagement: A New York Roundtable, October, 21, 2000

Twenty-four prominent university-based humanities scholars gathered in New York for a conversation on "The Public Face of the Humanities." The discussion was convened by University of Michigan President Lee Bollinger and Robert Weisbuch of Woodrow Wilson. This wide-ranging conversation underscored how productive opportunities for sociable thinking can be—and how central imagination is to change.

Participants included, among others: Thomas Bender, New York University; John D'Arms, President, American Council of Learned Societies; Stanley Fish, University of Illinois at Chicago; Marjorie Garber, Harvard University; Karla Holloway, Duke University; J. Paul Hunter, University of Chicago; Patricia Limerick, University of Colorado; Joseph Polisi, President, The Julliard School; Mary Poovey, New York University; Clement A. Price, Rutgers University; and Elaine Showalter, Princeton University.

President Bollinger posed the following questions:

• Is this a moment of remarkable creativity and invention in the academic humanities disciplines? If not, what would it take bring about such a moment? Is engagement the answer?

• What are the positive effects and potential dangers of fomenting the linkages between the two seemingly disconnected worlds of academe and "out there"?

- *What should be the relationship between humanists and artists, on the one hand, and local communities, on the other?*
- *How can we funnel our resources better to encourage these interconnections?*

Exploring these questions through a full day of lively exchanges, the group headed toward consensus on some key issues:

This is not a peak moment in the academic humanities. Excellent work is being done in exciting areas but we are hard put to claim that epochal shifts are the order of the day. Growing interest in citizenship and engagement might signal the next wave of innovation.

Universities should strongly support civic engagement by academic humanists—for the good of humanities scholars themselves as much as for the good of public and community life.

“Inreach” within the university is as important as “outreach” beyond the campus. Many of the barriers to engagement are internal to the academic culture of the humanities. Change from within is not going to come easily—commerce with the outside needs to be cultivated so as to force dynamics on the inside.

In summary, the group concluded that humanists need to document and extensively publicize those individuals and programs that have made extensive inroads in applying the humanities in the public sphere.

Practical Structures of Engagement: National Conference, Chicago 2000

On November 13-14, 2000, Imagining America held its national conference at the Chicago Historical Society. The conference was co-sponsored by Chicago Historical Society, the National Endowment for the Humanities, Northwestern University, the University of Michigan, the White House Millennium Council, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation.

The conference theme was “Supporting Public Cultural Work Through Practical Structures of Encouragement.” It drew people from Chicago, the region, and around the country who were eager to think hard about the relationship between universities and communities in specific places. The conference was a focused working meeting of Presidents Council members and their representatives, Public Scholarship Grant recipients, White House Millennium Council leaders, Imagining America National Advisory Board members, leaders of disciplinary and higher education associations and representatives of collaborating organizations, such as the Federation of State Humanities Councils and the National Assembly of State Art Agencies.

Chicago area cultural and educational leaders were featured on a special “Chicago Voices” panel. Richard J. Franke, Chairman Emeritus of The John Nuveen Co. and founder of the Chicago Humanities Festival, delivered the keynote address. This address, “Democratic Vistas of the Humanities,” will appear as the first number of Imagining America’s Foreseeable Futures series of position papers.

At the conference, the Presidents Council announced an extraordinary show of support for Imagining America’s mission, substantial demonstrations of commitment on 19 campuses.

Panelists celebrated Imagining America’s accomplishments as a White House Millennium Council partner program while striving to look beyond the constraints of existing programs. Presentations by university and community members of project teams funded by Woodrow Wilson’s Public Scholarship Grants were the acknowledged high point of the conference. The teams aired the sometimes messy but always powerful realities of collaboration for an appreciative audience.

Outreach implies that some people know and some people don't know. It doesn't work. What I would love to be able to communicate to you is how invigorating and thrilling it is as an artist to discover my art changing because of the nature of my relationship to a bunch of 80-year-olds.

—Liz Lerman, Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, White House Conference, 1999

Conclusion: Imagining America is a Movement

What does it mean to call Imagining America “a movement”?

It is happening now.

Campus-community partnerships in the arts and humanities are not something we are simply planning. We can never escape from what Jane Addams called, wonderfully, “the snare of preparation.” But we are not just situated in the snare of preparation now. We are out there doing real work.

It is happening everywhere.

Part of Imagining America’s mission is to capture information about engaged cultural work by university and community partners. We can barely keep up with the projects and programs that are being sustained and launched around the country.

It is self-conscious.

People know that they belong to a movement. They identify with it and understand themselves as a part of a significant public action.

People participating in the movement find one another.

They know about each other’s work. They find ways to gather new kinds of knowledge—and ways to publish, debate, and value that knowledge.

Members of the movement are energetic and inspired.

They speak with confidence and specificity, not in the language of complaint. To quote Liz Lerman of the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange, they state “what they are in praise of.”

A movement is “dissatisfied,” as Bob Weisbuch has insisted, but also purposeful and hopeful. It is for something, as well as against something. A movement “works with the rest of us,” urges Liz Hollander, Executive Director of Campus Compact. It plugs into existing organizations and networks, and does not reinvent the wheel. It is nimble and opportunistic in establishing strategic partnerships. It helps other organizations to move more decisively and fearlessly in innovative directions.

This movement is you. You are our activists.

Go forth and imagine America!

Movement
Imagining
America

What We Owe the Future

An Afterword

By Sondra Myers

What kind of society are we? What kind of society do we want to be? Our reflections on the role of the arts and humanities in the public life of America at this millennial moment must begin with these questions. This is neither an abstract nor a neutral discussion. It is about the United States as it might be—as we might imagine it—and what it will take to translate our imaginings into everyday reality.

Our nation is the product of the intellect and the imagination—an original. “Reaching back to the Greeks and reinventing what they discovered, the founding generation produced a new and reciprocal relationship between state and citizen,” writes historian Linda Kerber. Our political founders boldly declared that all of us have “unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” and they dared to “form a more perfect union” to ensure those rights. To be sure, their notion of “all of us” was limited: “We the people” included only white, mostly Protestant, property-owning males in the late eighteenth century. But the process of change was institutionalized with the adoption of the Constitution with its right of amendment. The first ten amendments, the Bill of Rights, created for Americans an infrastructure for self-government and a process for change that was historically unique. Thus, our inheritance is not one carved in stone as a fixed icon to be preserved at all cost. It descends to us as a habit of experiment.

The founders did their work, crafting a nation impelled by a widespread sense of opportunity. They valued scholarship and the arts, but wrote of them a bit wistfully, as though the serious pursuit of cultivation could be deferred. In a letter to his wife, Abigail, John Adams wrote: “I must study politics and war that my sons may have the liberty to study mathematics and philosophy...in order to give their children”—finally—“the right to study painting, poetry, music, and architecture.” His son, John Quincy Adams, had a stronger conviction of the need for national stewardship of humanistic knowledge. In his First Message to Congress, he declared that to refrain from promoting the learning of “the elegant arts [and] the advancement of literature...would be treachery to the most sacred of our trusts.”

But other Americans of John Adams’ own generation fused poetry and freedom into a single project. “Imagination! who can sing thy force?” exclaimed Phyllis Wheatley, in the volume published while she was still a slave. Addressing the Earl of Dartmouth (the new secretary of state for the colonies), Wheatley sang an end to tyranny: “O Liberty!... My Soul rekindles at thy glorious Name.” She instructed the Earl that, were he to ask “whence such daring Boldness sprung,/ Whence flow my Wishes for the common Good,” the answer would lie in the “bitter Pangs” of slavery itself.

Whether we are studying the founding of our republic in the eighteenth century, the forming of our system of public education in the nineteenth century, or the shaping of our urban culture in the twentieth century, we see ourselves experimenting. James Weldon Johnson, for example, described the Harlem Renaissance as nothing less than the re-imagining of America:

“Harlem is more than a community; it is a large-scale laboratory experiment.... Through his artistic efforts the Negro...is impressing upon the national mind the conviction that he is an active and important force in American life; that he is a creator as well as a creature; that he has given as well as received; that his gifts have been not only obvious and material, but also spiritual and aesthetic; that he is a contributor to the nation’s common cultural store; in fine, he is helping to form American civilization.”

“We the people” has been—is—a perpetual work in progress. In the words of Robert Hughes, ours is “an America whose making never ends.” We shaped it in the town forums of the Lyceum Movement and in the “home study circles” of the Chautauqua Assembly. We created university extension programs to serve the needs of rural communities. The Federal Writers project put authors to work recording Americans’ life stories. Noted Harvard President Charles Eliot, surveying American colleges and universities, felt that our institutions of higher education were “filled with the democratic spirit” and that “teachers and students alike” were “profoundly moved by the desire to serve the democratic community.” Active participation in the crafting of our cultures is central to this understanding of education.

The arts and humanities are an ecological necessity in an environment where citizens and democratic communities thrive. The existence of such terrain is neither automatic nor inevitable. It requires citizens’ broad access to the media of creativity: reading, writing, seeing, performing, probing.

To ensure a place for the arts and humanities on the American agenda, Congress passed the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act more than 35 years ago. The nation “must give full value and support” to scholarly and cultural activity “in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future.” With that act, we created the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Since that time, observes NEA Chairman Bill Ivey, the Arts Endowment has “fueled...the increasing hunger for the visual arts, music, dance, drama, and good design among American citizens.” Meanwhile, the NEH has touched millions of Americans with programs that support the full cycle of humanistic knowledge: sustaining scholarship, developing new kinds of teaching and learning communities, and making cultural resources available through reading groups, web sites, and television documentaries. Many arts and humanities programs have been conducted with college and university partners. Through such programs, university artists and humanists join with others in the community to enrich its cultural life.

What are the implications of this legacy for us now? It is not nostalgic to heed earlier visions of an enlightened citizenry with a passion for learning. But it is not so much what we owe the past as what we owe the future. “Why do we permit the waste of this most precious human faculty, this consummate possession of civilization?” asked Jane Addams. Creativity should be the very signature of this nation as we enter the 21st century. Our public policy and institutions of higher learning should put the highest priority on our most valuable renewable resources, human imagination and ingenuity.



Imagining New Government

“The arts and humanities are the storehouse of collective experience,” observes Robert Weisbuch, President of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. “They are humanity’s bank of hard-won wisdom, and they provide unique and self-aware ways of thinking.... They are the home of values, and no new technology can replace them.” They are fundamental to the task before us. It is our job to renew the American democratic tradition so that it responds to the new realities of our time.

An education in the humanities is not a private luxury—it is a public good, as A. Bartlett Giamatti believed passionately throughout his too-short life as Renaissance scholar, Yale president, and Commissioner of Baseball. Through meaningful cultural work connecting our communities and our campuses, we can begin to move beyond imagining a better America and toward creating it. It is what we owe the future.

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Creativity should be the very signature of this nation as we enter the 21st century.

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Information on the White House Millennium Council is available through the web site of the United States National Archives:

<http://clinton4.nara.gov/Initiatives/Millennium/index.html>

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