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Imagining America—Engaged Scholarship for the Arts, Humanities, and Design

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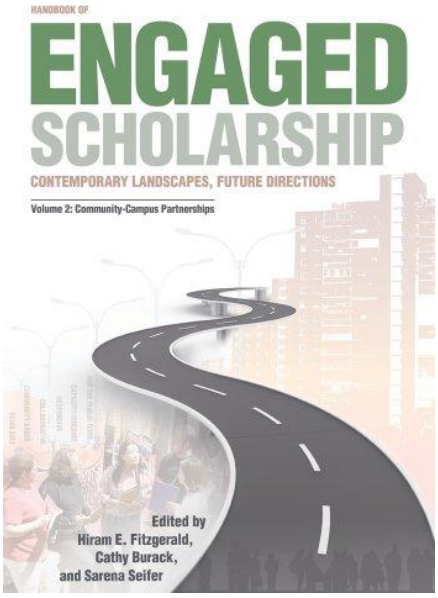

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Introduction

In 2001, a group of University of Michigan undergraduates spent much of an icy winter well away from the comforts of their Ann Arbor campus. Instead, they were conducting research in senior centers and community centers around the Michigan Central Railroad Station, a key transit point for the Great Migration, in which millions of African-Americans moved to the industrial northern states in search of employment and education, and an important landmark in ethnically diverse southwest Detroit. Under the guidance of history faculty and a playwright from Detroit's Matrix Theater, the students conducted oral histories and writing workshops, unveiling the hidden cultural and social life of the railroad station and its environs, and used the results to create a stage presentation entitled *Homelands*. The next year, *Homelands* was performed at the Matrix Theater by local high school students and for local audiences, and formed part of a multiplying group of cultural products, including an exhibit of historic photographs of the station, and a multimedia sourcebook documenting the partnership and providing a template of the project for other groups to use.

This is engaged scholarship in the arts and humanities: created in an equal and sustainable partnership between the university and a community organization, and resulting in new and relevant knowledge both for the academy and for its public, knowledge to be provided directly to the public. As one of Imagining America's early contributors noted:

> 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 work as a decoration on its surface, or observed from afar as the province of the privileged few. (Myers, 2001, p. 4)

It is to support such engaged cultural work between higher education and community partners that Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life was founded. Ten years later, Imagining America is a consortium of eighty-five colleges and universities committed to building democratic culture by fostering public scholarship and practice in the arts, humanities, and design. The consortium brings together higher education and community-based artists, scholars, design professionals, and the public to re-imagine the possibilities of higher education, with the goal of supporting member institutions as they develop their potential for civic engagement and collective problem solving.

In the following sections, we discuss the founding of Imagining America and the importance of developing a common language and culture; Imagining America's annual programming; current national initiatives; and organizational challenges. Each of these sections is related to Imagining America's

overarching goals of constituting public scholarship as an important and legitimate enterprise, encouraging structural changes in higher education to support knowledge creation through civic engagement, and forging comprehensive alliances to build the movement for transforming colleges and universities into centers of democratic renewal. We believe that democracy is dynamic, not fixed, and that a thriving democracy is marked by active, inclusive citizen participation in which individuals act not only in their own self interest but collectively toward the common good of their community.

History

Imagining America was launched at a 1999 White House Conference initiated by the White House Millennium Council, the University of Michigan, and the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation. The conference brought together government officials, scholars, artists, university presidents, foundation executives, and nonprofit leaders to describe, debate, and look for new opportunities for civic engagement in higher education. Participants reached a consensus about what was needed for public scholarship and practice to flourish: a national network, legitimization, and financial support.

After the conference, twenty-one participating college and university presidents agreed to build a national network with the formation of the Presidents Council. This Council became the basis for what would become Imagining America's consortium of colleges and universities. (To this day, a college or university president or chancellor must sign the Imagining America membership agreement.)

Confident in the civic engagement leadership of two of its humanities professors, the University of Michigan agreed to be the initial host campus for the consortium. Julie Ellison, who was then working in the University's Office of the Vice President, and David Scobey, who was launching the University's new Arts of Citizenship program, had observed that the arts, humanities, and design were underrepresented in national civic engagement associations. They also saw that there was no analytical framework to aggregate and critically consider the range of endeavors underway. What Ellison called a "language project" to create a common vocabulary and build a discourse around such work became a priority for the new organization.

With support from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, Imagining America quickly launched its Public Scholarship Grants program, which initially supported thirteen civic engagement projects in the arts, humanities, and design on member campuses. When the projects were completed, Imagining America invited project leaders to come together for a national conference to share and critique their experiences. The conference underscored the need for developing a narrative and accessible language about higher education's history and role in community engagement.

The antecedent for civic engagement work in higher education was service. Increasingly by the 1960s, colleges and universities were incorporating community service into their institutional mission, making it part of the higher education experience, although often as an extra-curricular activity. Reflecting an expanding consciousness in the last twenty-five years of the pedagogical importance of experiential learning, colleges and universities have integrated service into their curricula. This development from service to service-learning is perhaps best exemplified in the shifting focus of Campus Compact from volunteerism to service-learning during the early 1990s.

Imagining America is among those organizations that have continued to push the boundaries of service-learning by emphasizing civic engagement:

> Engagement goes well beyond extension, conventional outreach, and even most conceptions of public service. Inherited concepts emphasize a one-way process in which the university transfers its expertise to key constituents. Embedded in the engagement ideal is a commitment to sharing and reciprocity. By engagement the Commission envisions partnerships, two-way streets defined by mutual respect among the partners for what each brings to the table. (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 13)

Imagining America calls civic engagement work in higher education public scholarship and practice. In the arts, humanities, and design disciplines, engagement is initiated by artists, scholars, design professionals, and citizens, and encompasses multiple types of knowledge creation. Such scholarship and practice can take a variety of forms including work that expands the place of public scholarship in higher education itself by developing new engagement programs, methodologies, and evaluation metrics, as well as artistic, critical, and historical work that contributes to public debates and to understanding pressing social issues. Often, such scholarly and creative work is jointly planned and carried out through campus and community partnerships. The basic unit of such work is more often the project than the course. The final products of this activity also can take a variety of forms, such as books intended for broad audiences, community dialogues, art installations, and collectively conceived performances.

Out of Imagining America's iterative process of defining terms and assessing the public impact of such scholarship and practice, an analytical framework is emerging. As Ellison reflected, "In a nutshell, this common language is the result of the earnest work of translation, listening, and practicing the rare skill of saying what we are *for* as well as what we can *critique*, and the refusal by everybody to dumb everything down. Eventually all of this merges into a common culture, if you're lucky" (Brown, 2002, p. 18). Syracuse University's Chancellor and President Nancy Cantor, a leader in Imagining America's work since its founding, spoke eloquently about public scholarship in a 2008 speech: "We can do really good scholarship,

educate our students, and make a difference in the world by … situating our work at the center of the most challenging questions in our disciplines, the most vexing questions of our past, and the urgent issues that will chart the future" (Cantor, 2008, p. 2).

With the energetic leadership of Imagining America's associate director Juliet Feibel, Imagining America's membership has grown to eighty-five institutions. "Despite ever-tightening budgets at both public and private institutions," Feibel says, "this growth indicates that Imagining America is feeding a real intellectual hunger, a desire to unite civic action and scholarly practice. Universities and colleges are looking for ways to grapple with the demand for greater and more sophisticated methods of engagement, and these demands are coming from all sides: from students, faculty, community partners, trustees, and state legislatures" (J. Feibel, personal communication, July 18, 2008).

Annual Programming

Each year an Imagining America member institution hosts the national conference, which emphasizes sense of place. For example, the University of Southern California hosted the 2008 conference in Los Angeles – the most culturally diverse city in the United States – under the banner "Layers of Place, Movements of People: Public Engagement in a Diverse America." To bring conference participants closer to the city's urban realities, the planning committee scheduled one conference day at community organizations. Conference attendees typically include presidents and provosts, deans and chairs, professors, students, artists, and community members; on each individual's conference nametag, no title is listed. A variety of session formats (from panels and workshops to roundtables and poster presentations) help ensure there is adequate time and space for interaction with peers, and there are special meetings such as that of the National Advisory Board and the Publicly Active Graduate Education (PAGE) Summit. There is also opportunity for various affinity groups to gather – for example, those who wish to network within a specific geographic region, within a discipline, or by professional affiliation (e.g., a meeting of faculty administrators, deans, and chairs).

A spirit of inquiry reverberates in the conference sessions, which go beyond show-and-tell format in an effort to surface and grapple with critical issues. Welcoming critical analysis from all present, participants are not shy about sharing what *didn't* work with their campus-community project. In addition to bringing together a critical mass of scholars and practitioners, the conferences welcome participants from other national civic engagement associations.

By documenting its conferences and the year-round projects of its members, Imagining America is building a body of knowledge about public scholarship and practice. One vehicle for disseminating this knowledge is its series, *Foreseeable Futures*. In *Foreseeable Futures #3*, "Transforming America: The University as Public Good," Chancellor Cantor makes a passionate case for the arts as "a context for exchange" and "a medium for participation" in a society where "pervasive and longstanding racial divides persist" (Cantor, 2003). In *Foreseeable Futures #4*, "Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy," Imagining America's current board chair, George J. Sanchez, describes an alarming contradiction in higher education: while there is widespread growth in university service-learning and community engagement activities, there is also rapid erosion of programmatic support for minority students (Sanchez, 2004). In the 2007 *Foreseeable Futures* #7, "Brown University and the Voyage of the Slave Ship *Sally*, 1764-65," James T. Campbell spins the tale of the University's multi-year research project, led by its Steering Committee on Slavery and Justice, to determine how much monetary profit from the slave trade figured in the establishment of Brown, and how best to compensate for such ill-gotten gains (Campbell, 2007). All of Imagining America's publications, including its semi-annual newsletter, are available on its website, www.imaginingamerica.org.

Imagining America also contributes to its host institution, community, and state. At its founding institution, University of Michigan, the bar for exemplary local work was set high. There, Julie Ellison and David Scobey developed Imagining Michigan, which included an annual meeting of state arts agencies, state humanities councils, and colleges and universities, and the development of an online toolkit to facilitate state-wide exchanges. Now at Syracuse University, Imagining America is helping develop partnerships between campus and community focused on important regional development issues. With the salt industry, Erie Canal, and manufacturing no longer providing robust employment, Central New York's economy is struggling, and Syracuse University's public scholarship and community partnerships are pursuing solutions. For example, the Connective Corridor is a mile-and-a-half strip extending from the University through downtown Syracuse and encompassing twenty-five arts and cultural venues. As noted on the Connective Corridor website, **"**In the coming months and years, these venues will be stitched together and showcased with new urban landscapes, bike paths, imaginative lighting, public and interactive art, signage, and way finding systems. Participate in the project, and help transform our public places into vibrant social spaces on the Connective Corridor, Syracuse's new urban playground." Imagining America is developing courses and projects to support the Corridor's development. Cantor powerfully articulated the idea of such campus-community partnerships in her vision for Syracuse University as "Scholarship in

Action." Her contribution to higher education was recognized nationally in June 2008 when she received the Carnegie Corporation's Academic Leadership Award.

National Initiatives

The goal of the *Tenure Team Initiative* (TTI) is to expand tenure and promotion policies in support of publicly engaged work. The Tenure Team was formed in response to concerns voiced by Imagining America's members and National Advisory Board about the negative impact of standard tenure and promotion policy on public scholarship and practice. Imagining America's founding director Julie Ellison and its research director Timothy K. Eatman brought together a nineteen-member team, which included higher education presidents, provosts and vice presidents, deans, institute directors, and leaders of higher education associations, as well as senior faculty, artists, and civic professionals knowledgeable about tenure and promotion policy.

In October 2005, national TTI co-chairs Nancy Cantor and Steven D. Lavine, President of the California Institute of the Arts, announced the Initiative at the Imagining America national conference at Rutgers University. "We absolutely have to pay attention to the fact that a diverse professoriate and a diverse student body want to be engaged with the broader issues of our communities and publics, locally or around the world," Chancellor Cantor emphatically stated (Imagining America, 2005, p.1).

The strategy was to create the TTI report and subsequent action steps to help academic and institutional leaders and faculty better understand and make the case for public scholarship and its myriad enactments. Ellison and Eatman began by developing an extensive knowledge base on the topic; creating an online survey, which invited both structured and unstructured responses; and conducting in-depth interviews with team members. After drafting a substantive background study with preliminary recommendations, Ellison and Eatman completed the TTI report, entitled "Scholarship in Public: Knowledge Creation and Tenure Policy in the Engaged University, A Resource on Promotion and Tenure in the Arts, Humanities, and Design," in May 2008. In its Foreword, Cantor and Lavine declare, "To attract and keep a diverse faculty, we need flexible and clear guidelines for recognizing and rewarding public scholarship and artistic production" (Cantor and Lavine, 2008, p. iii).

The report begins by giving examples of commendable public engagement in the arts, humanities, and design. In the arts, for example, the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) was cited. Judith F. Baca, who founded SPARC in 1976 and is presently a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, has produced highly participatory, large-scale public art projects, including the Great Wall of Los

Angeles, a very long mural which depicts the span of Los Angeles' history. The work of David Scobey at Bates College in Maine furnishes another example of the efficacy of public scholarship. Scobey's collaboration with a local museum and community led to exhibitions telling the story of once-flourishing local mills, thus providing an historical perspective on the current local economy and culture.

Ellison and Eatman organize their recommendations around four continua:

- a continuum of scholarship within which academic public engagement has full and equal standing with other kinds of knowledge making;
- a continuum of scholarly and creative artifacts, noting, for example, that live performances and videos, like self-authored books and essays, document knowledge;
- a continuum of professional pathways for faculty, including the choice to be a civic professional; and
- a continuum of actions for institutional change.

The report includes an informational toolkit for campus action and a chart on Pathways for Public Engagement at Five Career Stages, from deciding to be a public scholar to exercising leadership.

The twelve recommendations in the TTI report are:

- Define public scholarly and creative work;
- Develop policy based on a continuum of scholarship;
- Recognize the excellence of work that connects domains of knowledge;
- Expand what counts;
- Document what counts;
- Present what counts: use portfolios;
- Expand who counts by broadening the community of peer review;
- Support publicly engaged graduate students and junior faculty;
- Build in flexibility at the point of hire;
- Promote public scholars to full professor;
- Organize the department for policy change; and
- Take this report home and use it to start something.

In June 2008, Imagining America held a working conference in New York City with representatives of its own member institutions, members of Campus Compact, and other national leaders in tenure policy for public scholarship. Seventy people attended, identifying and exploring how the TTI report could support graduate students, faculty practicing public scholarship, mid-level academics assessing the work, and upper

level administrators responsible for setting academic policy. At the center of the conversations were questions of how to use the report to promote policy change. As Eatman noted, "What we want to do is make sure there are ways for public scholarship to be evaluated so we can discern what is excellent and what isn't" (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 26, 2008). Imagining America will continue promoting its tenure recommendations at its own conferences as well as the conferences of other national organizations.

Another major national initiative is the *Publicly Active Graduate Education* (PAGE) program, which supports publicly active graduate students with professional development resources and a social network. As Ellison and Eatman state in the TTI report, "Graduate students are restless. Some are finding dissertation topics and peer mentoring networks that allow them to work out how to integrate engagement into their fields or disciplines" (Ellison and Eatman, 2008, p. 16). PAGE helps graduate students take charge of re-thinking the possibilities of their graduate education.

Imagining America annually invites graduate students in the arts, humanities, and design with a demonstrated interest in public engagement to apply to be PAGE Fellows. Since 2004, almost 300 graduate students have applied for a total of 60 fellowships. At the annual conference, fellows attend a day-long PAGE Summit, which is devoted to building the theoretical and practical language for each fellow to articulate their public scholarship. The Summit includes seminar-style discussions of public scholarship readings, in-depth consideration of the theoretical language and practical skills that fellows can take back to their own campuses, and small group critiques of individual research narratives. Fellows also attend the general conference sessions where they have ample opportunity for discussions with leaders in the field and other students and faculty who are creating and planning publicly active projects and careers, as well as administrators who support public scholarship policy.

Sylvia Gale, PAGE's founding director, notes:

> Some fellows come to the conference in the early stages of thinking through the civically engaged manifestations of their research interests. Others arrive having already crafted their own alliances and launched their own programs. Participation in the Imagining America conference has spurred PAGE Fellows to collaborate at other disciplinary conferences, propelled them into new leadership roles on their home campuses, and has helped Fellows to continue strategizing their degrees and advocating for the place of public scholarship within their own departmental and institutional frameworks. (Imagining America, Spring 2007, p. 12)

Current PAGE director Kevin Bott, doctoral candidate at New York University, has launched a new PAGE website as a forum for online resources, sharing, critical discourse, and social networking. He believes the website will help sustain the momentum and enthusiasm graduate students express at Imagining America's national conferences. Bott also hopes to institute a PAGE post-doctoral fellowship to support public scholarship at an Imagining America member institution. As noted in the TTI report:

> The success of PAGE has implications beyond the cultural disciplines. It contains lessons for Preparing Future Faculty (PFF) programs nationwide. PFF programs, as valuable as they are, do not concretely address graduate students' futures as civic professionals or as future faculty in colleges and universities with a strong public mission. Integrating new modules on dimensions of engagement into PFF programs could clarify professional pathways for graduate students and faculty" (Ellison and Eatman, 2008, p. 20)

Imagining America's third major national initiative is *The Curriculum Project*, which enhances curricula for public arts, humanities, and design. The project was conceived in 2007, when three colleagues – artistic director of Appalachia's Roadside Theater Dudley Cocke, then-New York University professor Jan Cohen-Cruz, and consultant Arlene Goldbard – compared notes from their extensive experience with higher education programs for community artists. They recognized a unique moment of opportunity for the field, which they articulated in a white paper, "A Call for Excellence in Community Cultural Development Curriculum in Higher Education." The paper highlighted four circumstances that they believed were converging to produce this moment of opportunity: universities across the U.S. were developing scores of individual courses, certificates, and degree programs in community cultural development; unprecedented numbers of students were matriculating in these programs – creating the circumstances to affect the field by affecting their education; social justice activists were increasingly collaborating with artists and cultural workers to bring cultural awareness into their efforts, understanding that culture is an essential foundation for community development and social change, and at the same time, artists were increasingly seeking intersectional partnerships for their work; and a critical mass of analytic writing and documentation was accruing, bringing new attention to community cultural development theories and practices that had been gathering force over the last four decades.

The shortcomings the co-investigators observed in current public scholarship programs included: the imbalance between disciplinary training and community engagement; curriculum gaps, often evidenced in a piecemeal approach; the absence of a larger context of meaning, including recognizing the spiritual and political impulses that often attract students to the work; inequitable campus-community partnerships; the lack of integration between scholarship and practice; the failure to recognize multiple types of knowledge;

and an inadequate appreciation for entrepreneurship that effective practice requires (Cocke, Cohen-Cruz, and Goldbard, 2008, pp. 1 – 3).

Cocke, Cohen-Cruz, and Goldbard proposed to research the current practice and potential for excellence in the education of community artists, and the Nathan Cummings Foundation agreed to support their effort. In June 2007, Cohen-Cruz became director of Imagining America and offered the organization as a home for the project. Three advisors were added to the research team, each with a unique perspective: community organizer Ludovic Blain III; recent graduate of a university program for community artists Jamie Haft; and educator, practitioner, and university vice president for diversity Sonia BasSheva Mañjon. The team's goal was to answer the questions: How are we educating community arts practitioners? How could training in this field be deepened and made more effective?

The first phase of the project focused on research to test the hypothesis that a model curriculum should have a balance of three components: training in both artistic practice and community organizing; community engagement based on reciprocity; and scholarship focused on the field's history and animating ideas. The research included gathering stakeholders' assessment of the state of the field through interviews and surveys and compiling syllabi and course descriptions. In September 2008, the research team published its findings through "The Curriculum Project Report: Culture and Community Development in Higher Education." Written by Arlene Goldbard, the report is framed by the history and terminology of community cultural development, which is described as "a range of initiatives undertaken by artists in collaboration with other community members to express identity, concerns and aspirations through the arts and communications media, while building the capacity for social action and contributing to social change" (Goldbard, 2008, p. 7). The report describes what the research found about the design of an ideal curriculum, the current state of education in the field, the challenges that are producing the gap between the actual and the ideal, and recommendations to close the gap.

The ten recommendations are:

- All parties should recognize that this is a period of action research, marked by experimentation in program design, curriculum, and approach to every element of community cultural development (CCD) education, and should engage in a spirit of true collaboration.
- It is essential that the values shaping grassroots CCD practice inform and influence education in the field.

- Excellence requires a balance of community engagement, training in artistic practice, and scholarship focusing on the field's history and animating ideas, as well as the economic and policy environments for CCD work.
- Vibrant, participatory critical discourse is essential to the success of both higher education and practice in CCD. Higher educational institutions are best positioned to seek support for a sustained, iterative discourse from within their own walls and from resource providers.
- Community cultural development in higher education should have an explicit goal of supporting and developing the field beyond university walls.
- Higher-education programs should develop peer relationships with community-based educational programs for practitioners.
- Effective CCD education requires meaningful, equitable, and collaborative relationships between educational institutions and community partners, and developing these relationships requires self-critical awareness from both parties.
- While "champions" may drive new programs as they come into being, it is critical to move toward strengthening programs, so that they don't disappear when their founders move on.
- An overarching aim should be to infuse CCD values across institutions and programs, connecting CCD focused programs with a matrix of related departments and programs by building relationships with collaborating departments and programs sharing similar values.
- Community cultural development practitioners and educators should collaborate in pursuing emergent opportunities that can benefit both higher education and community-based practitioners (Goldbard, 2008, p. 4).

By engaging in critical discourse about how community cultural development fits into public scholarship and practice in the arts, humanities, and design, The Curriculum Project deepens Imagining America's effort to define a common language. The report is being used to create more opportunities for exchange around pedagogy, to expand resources for undergraduate education, and to develop more ways for community colleges to benefit from their Imagining America membership. Next steps include translation of the report's findings into pedagogy of the public humanities and design, and web resources to support members' curricular efforts.

To advance and to ground these national initiatives in the realities of its constituents, Imagining America has instituted four to five regional meetings a year. Each meeting typically involves six to ten campuses in geographic proximity to one another, as well as community partners. More information about these three national projects, including project reports for download, can be found on Imagining America's website, www.imaginingamerica.org.

Conclusion

With Imagining America's growth and the increase in visibility and legitimacy for public scholarship, new sets of organizational challenges and opportunities are becoming apparent. The intimacy of the Imagining America national conference has always been one of the features members like most. How will this aspect change as attendance swells? The consortium has traditionally included only institutions of higher education, but while this membership structure aligns with the mission of transforming such institutions, it under-recognizes the institutions' community partners. In 2007, her first year as director of Imagining America, Cohen-Cruz addressed this issue, stating, "An organization committed to campus-community partnerships must find a way to articulate community in its membership" (J. Cohen-Cruz, personal communication, July 15, 2008). Among her first actions as director, Cohen-Cruz added three community members to the National Advisory Board, each of whom partners with higher education from a community-based perspective, and made it possible for community partners of member institutions to receive *Foreseeable Futures*, newsletters, and correspondences.

Imagining America is attempting to fully involve the diversity of its field, which includes land-grant, comprehensive, and metropolitan colleges and universities; liberal arts and research institutions; public, private, and community colleges; historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs); tribal colleges; faith-based institutions; and Hispanic-serving institutions. Although Imagining America's mission statement cites design, it is less represented in the membership than the arts and humanities. As remedy, it is opening its doors to the university members of the recently-disbanded CITYbuild, a loose knit national organization created in response to faculty and students from architecture, design, and urban planning eager to partner with community-based organizations involved in re-building New Orleans. Presently, HBCUs, tribal colleges, faith-based institutions, and Hispanic-serving institutions are underrepresented in Imagining America. The consortium's critical discourse will undoubtedly ripen with improved inclusion of such institutions, all of which typically have close relationships with their communities. The spirit of collective achievement, an ethos of

"lifting as we climb," is evident throughout the HBCU experience, and sustaining a community's cultural traditions is part of the mission of tribal colleges. And for a number of students, it is faith and spirituality that draw them to service and civic engagement. Addressing these membership gaps will require Imagining America to reflect on the current cost and benefits of membership. Are Imagining America's current services responsive to the interests and orientations of these missing members, or must new benefits and cost structures be created to attract them?

Imagining America serves the important function of a service organization, providing resources to an expanding membership, and it also provides significant leadership to the field of engaged scholarship in higher education. Its principal achievements over the past ten years—coalescing a movement around a common language, building a national membership, fostering a growing body of knowledge and critical discourse, and contributing solutions to the pressing issues of our times—are benefits accrued not only to the membership institutions who have made them possible, but also to scholars, administrators, and students across the nation who learn from and profit by them. At some point, Imagining America will make its second transition to a new host institution within its consortium of colleges and universities. Committed to building democratic culture by fostering public scholarship and practice in the arts, humanities, and design, Imagining America and its members will continue to re-imagine the possibilities of higher education, and to work in partnership to make what is imagined a reality.

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Authors' Note

Robin Goettel is assistant director and Jamie Haft, program coordinator, of Imagining America. Before coming to the organization, Goettel's involvement in public life included ten years serving on her local school board. Haft is a recent graduate of a publicly engaged arts program. Thanks to director Jan Cohen-Cruz who gave staff the opportunity to write comprehensively about Imagining America and who, with associate director Juliet Feibel, edited the text. Both Feibel and research director Timothy K. Eatman helped get us started by sharing their Imagining America experience.