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Transcript of Selected Panelist Remarks from IA's Plenary on Assessment
October 2, 2009

This transcript includes panelist remarks by: **Bruce Burgett**, Professor and Director, Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, University of Washington, Bothell; **Fluney Hutchinson**, Professor, Economics, Lafayette College; **Sylvia Gale**, Associate Director, Bonner Center for Civic Engagement, University of Richmond; **Dudley Cocke**, Director, Roadside Theater/ Appalshop; and **George Sanchez**, Director, Center for Diversity and Democracy, University of Southern California.

Three panelists are not represented in this transcript: **Pam Korza**, Co-Director, Animating Democracy Initiative, Americans for the Arts; **Gregory Jay**, Professor of English and Director, Cultures and Community Program, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee; and **Rob Corser**, AIA - Assistant Professor, University of Washington. Korza presented a summary of *The Curriculum Project Report: Culture and Community Development in Higher Education;* Jay presented a summary of *What (Public) Good Are the (Engaged) Humanities?;* and Corser presented a summary of *Design in the Public Interest – The Dilemma of Professionalism*. These materials can be downloaded at http://curriculumproject.net/materials.html.

Bruce Burgett:

I was tasked with talking about commonalities and differences across the reports of arts, humanities, and design. I think I was chosen for this, or self nominated, because I have never been comfortable with the ways in which we at IA have divided things up into those three sectors of arts, humanities, and design, or, with the way we separated off the cultural disciplines from other disciplines and sectors that work with and through the medium of culture. I know that the category of the cultural discipline is a useful umbrella in some contexts. In my particular context, working with undergraduate and graduate interdisciplinary programs that span from environmental science to the arts in an integrative way, the cultural disciplines is a less useful umbrella since it leaves about half my colleagues out in the rain. In the context of programs such as ethnic studies and women studies that have done hard work to bridge qualitative and quantitative methodologies, it can also be divisive.

Let me limit myself, then, to two observations about the reports: The first observation concerns a term that emerged from some of the conversations that produced the reports – engagement objectives. That term made me nervous so I googled it last night and what did not come up, I am happy to say, is a bunch of military websites on how to pacify local insurgencies. What did come up was a bunch of accounting websites on how a CPA can pacify fiscal insurgencies, which is a whole other paper. Engagement objectives come from Greg Jay's essay – you heard the points that he listed from the end of his essay. Greg's essay raises a question of transforming learning objectives related to engagement. When we start talking about engagement objectives, the point is that assessment of learning is not the only goal. The goal is to build sustainable, mutually beneficial, and generative partnerships. Now, faculty often equate assessment with learning objectives. That's useful, because it aligns the individual assignment to the course to the curriculum. It centers curriculum as an important event in a university, and

centers student learning, and that's all good, but, I think it's also limited in a couple of ways.

One is obvious: it makes it easy to recast a project that makes a mess of a partnership as a teachable moment. So the partnership becomes a success with regards to the course's learning objectives, even if there was a colossal failure in regard to community impact. The reverse is also true: you can have a project that has a lot of beneficial community impact but does little to facilitate learning, with no successful reflection in the classroom. The less obvious limitation is that learning objectives are not a good map of institutional power. In my current position, I sit monthly in the chancellor's cabinet meeting where everyone is talking all the time about campus community partnerships – the people in admissions, public relations, government relations, alumni relations, and advancement are all obsessed with this topic. If I look around the room of 20-25 people, and I total up how many courses they have all taught, it's probably about 40, and I have probably taught 30 of those courses. So, at both of these levels of scale – the assignment/course and the college/university – shifting from the question of learning objectives to engagement objectives is useful in trying to think about what an alignment would look like along that axis. The question becomes how to work collaboratively to develop cross-sectoral metrics to assess institutional success in collaboration. I think it's a very interesting intellectual question of how you look across sectors and different professional formations in order to think about what success would look like. The downside of this is it de-centers the curriculum; the upside is it puts the curriculum in conversation with larger issues of institutional power. Now there are lots of implications of this but I am going to stop there.

The second observation is about graduate education with relation to academic and professional programs. Rob Corser's essay uses academic curricula as a way to unsettle the narrow forms and norms of professional training in design that are set up to promise lucrative careers on the way out the door. Greg Jay's essay casts academic curriculum in the humanities as imperiled by the rise of professional programs. Now, those of you who know me will think that what I am about to do is suggest we break down that distinction, but I'm not. Instead I'm going to channel Randy Martin and assert that it has already collapsed. What has happened is that the horizon of culture has vanished. If you try and locate where is culture and where is it not, then it is very hard to pin that down these days after the cultural turns in the university and outside the university. So the borders of culture have vanished, but the cultural disciplines remain. On the one hand, we could worry that this means that business schools and other professional programs are stealing our market share when they teach cultural studies or talk about creativity; that's one response, hunkering down as Greg Jay put it. On the other hand, we could also think about how we should create bridges, as Rob Corser suggests, to professional programs by insisting that all graduate education should be a public good with the goal of producing critical practitioners either inside or outside the university.

And this is a final aside: in the context of the current budget crisis at my university, there is a lot of discussion about fee based graduate programs. The graduate programs that result in lucrative careers are the ones that are going to be fee based and won't seek state support. What happens is that the student pays a lot of money with the idea that graduate education is a private good and they will make it up on their way out the door. Once those horses of privatization are out of the barn, it is going to be much

harder to bridge academic and professional programs, so it seems to me that we are in an interesting and critical moment.

Fluney Hutchinson:

I normally like to surprise people in audiences like this by telling them I'm an economist. So, I'm kind of a misfit here. But, there is a really good reason why I belong. I had a meeting with my provost a few days ago, and my institution is one where the focus is on engineering and natural sciences, applied sciences, and economics – my profession. Art and humanities are under a constant threat, and they always have to evaluate themselves. Then I read Greg's essay about what the humanities have to do to justify themselves. He wrote, "My speculation is that the future of the humanities will depend upon two interrelated innovations: the organized implementation of project-based engaged learning and scholarship, on the one hand, and the continued advancement of digital and new media learning and scholarship, on the other hand." My provost needed to understand how the humanities could create exchange value in a program like ours.

You heard Bruce speak of the terms of the new environment that you might have to complete in, which is one where the humanities have to justify themselves going forward, or as we economists say, they have to achieve high exchange value.

The good thing, however, is that the humanities are actually a way in which higher ed can justify *itself* in this economy. For example, I have a team now that works on projects in the lower ninth ward. For those who came out last night, it was a wonderful experience to listen to the community as it tries to build and be in charge of its own development. My team consists of an art professor, two engineers, a geologist, a psychologist, an English professor, and myself as an economist. We have created a community of scholars that is versed in public scholarship around community empowerment issues. What we have found is that by having the disciplines speak to each other, it's created a kind of consilience. Now, we can ask new kinds of questions through a new lens, and go about our problem solving in ways that's only possible because the arts, humanities, and design are foundational in the ways in which we engage, approach, and pursue. That, to me, is an example of how Imagining America, and, the arts, humanities, and design, are fundamental to how we address this new normal, where people have to justify every dollar they put in higher ed. They need to understand how it's creating enough value added to justify the expenses that it is demanding.

I'm here saying to you, as we look at the new challenges that higher ed is going to face, I cannot think of any other way than to have arts, humanities, and design create a consilience across all disciplines, allowing economics and engineering to ask better questions, to design the agency of community, and to make sure the architecture reflects the community, so every time they see their community it reflects their feelings and experiences. So, again, since I'm here talking about how other disciplines fit into this, we need to start understanding why we need to bridge what we do hear into the rest of the academic space, the rest of the community, into creating – not bridges into new disciplines – a new approach to thinking about things. That's where what you do here brings richness and justification for higher ed as it goes forward. We can start building the assessment way to capture it. As an economist, I'm concerned with the economizing of knowledge making, economizing of student learning, economizing of institutional reflection and reorganization. All of those things require art, humanities, and design for

the institution, for the students, for the knowledge making, and scholarship to take place in an efficient way. We can't afford to exhaust people's time and their resources to get to the point we need to get to, which is, to validate higher ed going forward. So, I challenge this group to understand the importance of what you do. You are the future of higher ed. Find a way to bring the assessment of arts, humanities, and design to be part of the new normal in universities and colleges.

Sylvia Gale:

I'm going to respond to the comments we heard, which I digested in the readings beforehand, with my own perspective from my institution, and share what energizes and perplexes me about the question of assessing civically engaged projects. I'm a recent graduate student and a new hire into a hybrid faculty-staff position as the new Associate Director of the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement at the University of Richmond. That means that I am speaking to you from a center located within academic affairs, committed to long-term sustainable university-community partnerships that meet the needs of our partners, while providing our students and faculty with meaningful academically-grounded experiences. In other words, it's my dream job.

It is so not only because of the work my center does but because, as I'm learning, the president of the University at Richmond, Ed Ayers, has put civic engagement at the heart of the university's strategic plan, which was conveniently released a month before I was hired. The plan promises "a determination to engage as a meaningful part of the Richmond community, of the nation, and of the world" as a central tenant of a University of Richmond education. This has created a tremendous amount of momentum on campus and a kind of frenzy to tie to our center, which David Scobey told me is a good thing, so I'll accept it. But it does make me nervous. The strategic plan is a goal-driven, action-step saturated document; it is the prelude to a series of annual reports. When civic engagement is at the heart of the University, so is its assessment. And now, as I have been appointed to lead this assessment initiative in my office, I see just how unprepared I am to demonstrate the impact of civic engagement and, especially, to do it in ways that mirror our center's values, in particular, the value we have placed in reciprocal partnerships.

So, let me clarify. I believe in assessment as a generative framework, as a tool, or better yet a culture, that drives program development – I've been really influenced by the Geraldine Dodge Foundation on this, and I refer you to their website about their assessment initiative. But, I think in the past I thought I was engaged in assessment when I was really practicing healthy evaluation. This is not surprising; as we've discussed, we know how to do evaluation in academia, and at the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement we are really good at the best kind of evaluation, constantly collecting data about our students and partners and faculty experiences, and using this feedback to refine our programs. This is an essential but short feedback loop, one that allows us to understand our failings, but not one that, so far, has allowed us to assess their actual impact in our community.

I think the questions that Gregory Jay raises at the end of his essay are excellent for assessment. I'm going to echo his and add some of my own questions in closing. He asks, "What are we looking for in our assessments of benefits to the communities we work with? Are we looking for a change of consciousness, implementation of new

programs, an increase in the number of participants in a given initiative, a tangible improvement in the lives of certain community members, short term gains, or long term gains?" The answers to those questions obviously, at least in the kinds of engagement I want to be involved with, are in the specifics of the partnerships.

With that in mind, here are the questions that resonate for me and my center. First, how do we create assessment tools that meet our partners' needs for assessing their work *and* give us the data we need about the impact our partnerships and programs are having? That seems crucial in an environment where our mostly non-profit partners and increasingly being driven to measurement and evaluation by their own funders. And yet, part two of that question: we also need to find ways to assess and represent the impact of our partnerships and programs without succumbing to the narrative of transformation, a narrative that is, I know from my own grant writing, embedded in many requests from funders.

Question two: given that assessment is so deeply tied to program design and goal setting, should we involve our community partners more deeply in the process of establishing – I'll borrow language from my university's HR office here – specific, measurable, attainable, time-sensitive outcomes for our programs? How would that compare to the ways we currently strive to ensure that we're meeting community needs, through frequent communication and long term relationship building?

Finally, how can we insure that the assessment initiatives we undertake in our center are knowledge producing, contributing to our collective understanding of civic engagement, and examples of the critical self-reflection I think is necessary to engaged scholarship, and not merely show pieces for future annual reports? Let's discuss.

Dudley Cocke:

Twenty-five years ago, I was spending a winter night with my friend, John O'Neal, in the Treme neighborhood. It was uncharacteristically cold for New Orleans, and John had no heat. The next morning, I slipped outside to warm my bones in the sunny corner of a nearby building. Before long, I was joined by an elderly gentleman who had the same idea. We got to talking, and I asked him what he thought about President Reagan's economic policies. After considering the question, he said, "Seems like the ducks got so much water the chickens is goin' thirsty."

Now, after three decades of economic trickle-down, in most cases the closer one is to the ground (to the neighborhood, to the community) the more severe the drought. We only know anecdotally how many community-based organizations, which should still be contributing to local vitality, have had to lock their doors. Each locked door represents a closing off of hope. In such an environment, the risk of being co-opted increases for neighborhood organizations, something we should be especially sensitive to when structuring our campus-community partnerships.

In a new Bob Dylan song, there's a repeating line, "Everything's broken." For us, I would say "Everything's fractured." Silos dominate the intellectual landscape, precluding a commons for democratic discourse. I think that an IA assessment initiative can help create this much needed neutral ground. You may have noticed the Goals in IA's new Vision, Mission, Values statement furnish general criteria for assessment. Here are three examples in which I have taken the Goals' statements and posed them as assessment questions: Is the campus-community partnership embedding the knowledge

and practices of the cultural disciplines in problem-solving initiatives designed to advance social equity? Does the partnership make recognition of cultural diversity central to its problem solving? Is the partnership building bridges among arts, humanities, and design fields, and across other knowledge sectors?

Furthermore, by investigating the connections between the public humanities, arts, and design, I think we will begin to see the outline of a paradigm shift. Here's a ready example from the conference's assigned reading. In his essay, "Design in the Public Interest – The Dilemma of Professionalism," Rob Corser wrote: "It is not unlikely that the key design break-through might come, like a lightning bolt, at this early informative stage [of mutually redefining problems and opportunities] of collaboration."

Similarly, Roadside Theater has discovered that when artists open their play development process to public participation, catharsis for audiences can occur at any point in a creation continuum. Artists have long enjoyed this experience, and now the public is to be included. This is an example of the shift in our thinking that can lead to the achievement of our stated Vision to be "a catalyst in the generation of cultural knowledge and creative practice for the democratic development of campuses and communities."

George Sanchez:

I'm supposed to talk to you about diversity and democracy as it relates to assessment, but the words assessment, metrics, and accountability scare me. I've been thinking about why they scare me and about culture writ large that many and I share, and I go back to what I have read by Julie Ellison about the various faculty cultures in the humanities. The second culture she defined, the civic engagement culture, works against traditional aspects of culture. I think about how much of that culture is rooted in an independence from tradition, and I think that that independence of tradition smacks up against this resistance with assessment, metrics, and accountability. I want to start there because I think that's a critical thing for all of us to struggle with as we struggle with these very words.

For me, I have to go to the deep meaning of what we're doing when we're saying we want to assess what we do. I think this is a wonderful culture in which we need to borrow from each other. This is one of the aspects I've learned from diversity. We need to learn from the parts of IA that do this better than we do, than I do. That sometimes is community partners, who know how to incorporate assessment because they have the base-facts in terms of funding they might get. That sometimes is parts of faculty communities that have to do assessment and incorporate it in their grants and in their research, which is rare in the humanities where I come from. We have to deal and actually utilize the diversity of IA in order to really reach out to what we want to interpret as assessment.

The issue of diversity comes up powerfully in Greg Jay's essay around his questions. Who is this public that we engage with? Is it all the public, is it not all the public? What do we do – and this is the area I work in – with people who aren't considered legitimate players in the public? Are those that bring up issues of alienation in our public discourse part of that public? In California, where I'm from, that may be 30-40% of the local community, and if you include their children, it's 60-70%. So, what does it mean to include or not include that in the public and to assess or not assess

whether in fact we're reaching them. For many of us that's a very critical thing. These are difficult topics in terms of thinking about whether our work reaches out to everyone that actually is in our scope. Maybe even more so if we take seriously the issue of the global. What does it mean to evaluate the global and local efforts? What does it mean to incorporate people who themselves may be operating between the global and the local, as they might migrate from one place to another. Particularly in this country, it has such trouble thinking of those people as legitimate members of our society.

The second question in this is: who are we? Who are we as IA? How do we expand in the work that we do, those that incorporate and feel they are part of the projects we're involved in? For a long time, in a lot of this work that I've done in the humanities, we've allowed our language to lead. Our language leads for very important reasons. We often master that language in lots of different ways; we know what to talk about. But I come from at least twenty years of looking at how language has hurt the discussion of identity politics or the discussion of post-racial society. The use of language to try to get to some place, which is about denying that same place for others. I think it's important in this issue of assessment to think about yes, what kind of language we use, but how we actually broaden the reach of those that we can attract into civic engagement work. That we can actually assess whether we're making an impact in broadening that reach. That's very difficult work. It's very time consuming work, but it's incredibly important to broaden therefore our tools for making those assessments as we think about this.

I want to ask again the one question I keep going back to in thinking about this work. Are we advancing through our work civic democracy for all in our communities? To me, that's the basis to which all of this discussion should start.

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