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Higher Education on the World Stage of Democracy: Overcoming an “Anemia of Deeds”

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*Why We’re Here: Civic Purposes of Universities
and Threats to Democratic Culture*

It is no exaggeration to state that higher education always has understood its most fundamental mission is to prepare people for their civic responsibilities. Even the first academies of ancient Greece were self-consciously convened for this purpose.² So, when university leaders met last June under the auspices of the Council of Europe for the International Conference on the Responsibility of Higher Education for a Democratic Culture, it was not an abrupt departure from tradition, although many of the traditions of citizenship have changed significantly since the days of the Greek polis. Rather, that meeting in Strasbourg last June was a new milepost in the millennia-long engagement of higher education with the issues of civic life. Our gathering here today also reflects how true academia remains to this central, organizing purpose.

On the other hand, it is not an ordinary occurrence that a group of leaders from so many esteemed institutions of higher education should feel the need to collaborate on a joint statement such as the *Declaration on Higher Education and Democratic Culture: Citizenship, Human Rights, and Civic Responsibility*, issued as a result of last year’s conference. And, again, it is not an ordinary occurrence that all of us—representatives of universities from around the world—should feel compelled to gather to begin constructing an agenda for action on these issues. We should understand this as a sign that the threats to democratic culture and human rights are sufficiently grave that they require concerted action on a global scale.

In a sense, we at universities have always functioned as the proverbial “canaries in a coal mine,” detecting “toxins” that threaten society at large before they become patently obvious and, once known, we focus the public’s attention on them to ensure their remediation. What, then, are we seeing today that potentially undermines democratic culture and human rights worldwide, in our respective homes and across the globe? Here are some toxins to frame my comments this evening.

- The distribution of wealth in democratic societies is much less like the familiar bell curve than a barbell. Further, the poor are disproportionately women and members of minority groups.

¹ Keynote address at the international conference titled “Universities, Democratic Culture and Human Rights: An Action Agenda,” hosted by the Center for Community Partnerships, University of Pennsylvania, March 29, 2007.

² For example, while Plato and Aristotle may have differed in their understandings of the capacities of individuals, their common educational goal was to prepare people for the roles they would play in society. See Plato’s *The Republic* and Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* for discussion of their conceptions of the goals of education.

- The demographics of many of our countries are changing dramatically—with growth in racial/ethnic minority groups and shifting patterns of immigration, and we are failing to educate and tap this talent.
- In many urban centers in democracies around the globe, the cradle-to-prison pipeline is overpowering the cradle-to-college pipeline.
- Degradation of the environment is increasing exponentially and threatens the future prosperity of developed and developing economies, as well as our health and well-being.
- Inter-ethnic and inter-cultural conflicts are escalating everywhere, even as the so-called “clash of civilizations” spreads fear and encourages insularity.

Against this backdrop, universities have an especially urgent role to play as canaries in the mines, but also as catalysts for action. How well are we positioned to act in this way for the public good? Here, I would say the picture is more mixed.

- On one hand, in the global knowledge economy, the return on investment for education has never been greater or more important to future health and prosperity.
- On the other hand, the fierceness of individual competition for a leg up in the knowledge economy has, at least in this country, weakened the collective will for social justice and social mobility, just at a time when access to education for, and economic empowerment of, an increasingly diverse population looms most paramount.³

Therefore, I believe that universities today are in a particularly tricky position as we pursue questions of democratic culture and human rights. We control a precious commodity in a knowledge-driven economy, yet we must stand for access and generous sharing of innovation, shifting from a “consumer” focus to encompass the public benefits of higher education. In so doing, we must engage directly with the most pressing issues of our day—the toxins that poison our democratic cultures—from environmental degradation to poverty and illiteracy to inter-ethnic and cultural conflicts and all other “clashes of civilizations,” real or imagined, that divide us and weaken the collective will. All of these toxins have local manifestations worthy of universities engaging directly and vigorously, and at the same time, they also resonate globally, connecting us to each other in a broad and rich network of social capital that we can put to great use, as this conference intends.

To fully realize this expansive mission for higher education, including a global network of activism manifest in this meeting, we must take account of two more trends that characterize

³ Nancy Cantor, *Scholarship in Action: Why Community Commitment Matters*, speech delivered at the 50th Anniversary Symposium, Center for the Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education, University of Michigan, January 12, 2007.

not just the societies in which we live, but our campus communities as well. First, participation in some of the most fundamental responsibilities of democratic citizenship, such as voting, is flagging. Such trends have been cited by the *Universities as Sites of Citizenship* project conducted by 15 European universities and are widely noted with increasing alarm in this country.⁴ Whereas there is considerable enthusiasm for volunteerism and service-learning, and cyber networking is ever more popular, it is not self-evident that this translates to a vigorous embrace of communal responsibility, as opposed to individual agendas. And, second, there appears to be a popular skepticism or at least under-appreciation of the value of pluralism and the interdependence of cultures and communities in our civic agenda. This is, perhaps, bolstered by that individualism and the superficiality of virtual communication.⁵

In contrast to this popular skepticism and the individualism that underlies it, I believe that at the center of any network of effective activism, must be a profound understanding of the role of pluralism, as the glue that holds the democratic fabric of citizenship together. If as individuals—academic leaders, faculty, students—and as institutions we are ready to move from consumers to engaged citizens, then we must also learn to regard as precious the diversity of difference amongst us, and the possibility of common ground. As the Aga Khan, the spiritual leader of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, noted in a speech delivered after the tragedy of September 11th: “the strengthening of institutions supporting pluralism is as critical for the welfare and progress of human society as are poverty alleviation and conflict prevention. In fact the three are intimately related.”⁶

Global Responsibility and Universities: Building Bridges that Collapse Walls

The flames of today’s conflicts are often fed by monolithic perceptions of the “other” that make it all too easy to see them as enemies. When cultural and religious and ethnic pluralism are reduced to nothing more than homogeneity and “otherness,” then our communities fall apart, and we either walk further away into different gated communities, or we fight, or we do both. As the Aga Khan said of the so-called clash of civilizations: “The clash, if there is such a broad civilisational collision, is not of cultures but of ignorance.”⁷

Whenever ignorance is identified as a key element of the toxins threatening democratic culture, then of course we know that universities must rise to the occasion, as today’s meeting acknowledges. To borrow a metaphor from Angela Davis, education—which replaces ignorance with experience—can turn a wall into a bridge,⁸ and that is what we hope to achieve here, as we

⁴ See Frank Plantan, Jr. (General Rapporteur), *General Report: European Sites Study, Universities as Sites of Citizenship and Civic Responsibility*, International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy, February 2002 and *General Report: United States Study, Universities as Sites of Citizenship and Civic Responsibility*, International Consortium for Higher Education, Civic Responsibility and Democracy, April 2001.

⁵ See Vartan Gregorian, “The Pursuit of Knowledge: Grounding Technology in Both Science and Significance,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 9, 2005, B5 and Eric Hoover, “Here’s Looking at You, Kid: Study Says Many Students are Narcissists,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, March 9, 2007, A41.

⁶ His Highness the Aga Khan, *Pluralism Key to Peace and Development*, Keynote Speech at the Prince Claus Fund’s Conference on Culture and Development, Amsterdam, September 7, 2002.

⁷ His Highness the Aga Khan, keynote address delivered at the Governor General’s Canadian Leadership Conference, The Canadian Museum of Civilization, Gatineau, Quebec, Canada, May 19, 2004.

⁸ Angela Davis, “Walls turned sideways are bridges,” *An Autobiography*, New York: International Publishers [reprint], 1988, 346.

map a call to action for our universities on the landscape of global democracy and human rights. This bridge needs to be a two-way street of exchange, global to local, and local to global, as we push to embed the world at home and stretch our homes to the world. As we connect our universities to our local communities, the progress we make should have global resonance, just as the large issues of the world should be brought closer to home, not to be left only to diplomats and diplomacy.

This interweaving of local-global is apparent when we seek antidotes to any of the toxins afflicting our world. We have certainly experienced this in Syracuse, especially as we work on economic empowerment, inter-cultural dialogue, and environmental sustainability in our city and region, and I am sure it rings true for many others in this room.

For example, our neighborhood entrepreneurship projects in Syracuse involve among other things, micro-credit loans to underwrite the women and minority entrepreneurs in our South Side Innovation Center. This mirrors the pioneering work of 2006 Nobel Peace Laureate Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank he founded to provide micro-credit to women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh.



Likewise, the work of a local grassroots organization, Women Transcending Boundaries,⁹ promotes inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogues across the divides of fear and ignorance in our region. These divides, and their dialogues, resemble those occurring all over our world, as we saw and heard recently in Syracuse when an extraordinary array of diplomats, human rights activists and scholars—from Washington, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon, Kenya, and more—came for a “people’s peace summit” titled “Small World/Big Divides.”

⁹ For further information on Women Transcending Boundaries, see <http://www.wtb.org> .



And the same local-global resonance is obvious in the arena of environmental sustainability. In Syracuse, as scientists work on the remediation of Onondaga Lake—a Superfund casualty of post-industrialization that also is a sacred site for our neighbors from the Onondaga Nation—we also engage in dialogue on globally resonant questions of environmental justice, religion, and culture.



For example, in a year-long series of symposia, we have joined indigenous leaders to focus on the Onondaga Land Claims and their relevance to social and environmental justice. As these dialogues unfolded, they were informed by visits from and engagement with human rights

and environmental activists working around the globe, including Jane Goodall and her Roots and Shoots movement, and 2004 Nobel Laureate Wangari Muta Maathai, pioneering leader of the women's rights movement of re-forestation in Kenya. Indeed, these grass-roots environmental movements emerging worldwide emphasize the inter-relationships between environmental and cultural sustainability, and poverty alleviation and human rights.

From Resonance to Engagement in Public Scholarship

The local-global resonances that we see around us should prompt universities to go beyond the whistle-blowing of canaries in the mines to an action-oriented agenda of innovation that matters, and education that produces publicly-minded citizens rather than narrowly focused consumers. To do this well, we must look outward, to the communities with which we are connected geographically, and to the pressing issues that affect our communities but know no geographic boundaries. In so doing, we must be willing to embrace public scholarship that is bold, imaginative, reciprocal, and sustained, in ways that simultaneously democratize our institutions and our communities, and set precedents of democratic culture that can reach beyond our local landscapes.

We can do this by leveraging the precious asset that universities bring to the international knowledge economy —intellectual capital—to address the most pressing problems of the world, especially those associated with disenfranchisement of the disadvantaged in democratic societies. We can also model collaboration across all economic sectors by brokering the exchange of assets of each sector for the benefit of all. This will rekindle the collective public will, quiet the noise of individualism, and restore confidence in universities as institutions that fundamentally serve the public interest.

While there is perhaps a longer tradition of universities as canaries in the mines than one of mobilization to fully engage the public good, there clearly is momentum in this direction. Certainly, we can point to conferences such as those preceding today's and to the *Declaration on Higher Education and Democratic Culture*. There are similar agreements that have taken shape, such as the *American College and University Presidents Commitment on Climate*, which has been signed by leaders of institutions represented here today. It commits the signatories to “exercise leadership in their communities and throughout society by modeling ways to eliminate global warming emissions, and by providing the knowledge and the educated graduates to achieve climate neutrality.”¹⁰

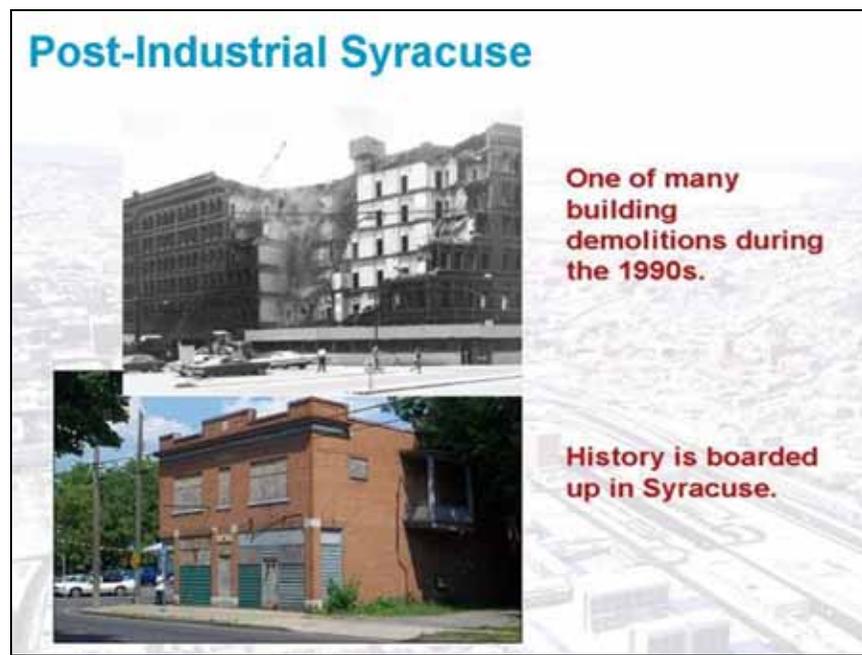
While such collegial commitments are a necessary element in addressing the profound problems that we all face, they are not sufficient. We must also adopt mobilization for the public good as a fundamental operating principle at each of our individual institutions, so that serving the public good pervades daily decision making. We are still in an era in which we are just learning how to do this. Fortunately, models of this kind of mobilization are developing. Our gracious host, Ira Harkavy, and Penn's Center for Community Partnerships—founded 15 years ago now—stand out as a leading example.

Scholarship in Action in Syracuse

¹⁰ See <http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org/>.

We at Syracuse University have turned our full attention to this challenge to mobilize. Our institutional vision of *Scholarship in Action* provides us with a strategic framework for promoting public scholarship with local connections and global resonance. At Ira's instigation, I'd like to use it as an example of how such scholarship is being practiced and can be beneficial to a community, to a university, and in a global context.

The city of Syracuse, as you may know, was a casualty of our nationwide de-industrialization, as manufacturing operations moved offshore and we were hurtled into the knowledge economy with our inner city depopulated, our schools badly deteriorated, our historic buildings boarded up, and, as I noted earlier, our beautiful Onondaga Lake filled with mercury and other pollutants.



Still, Syracuse is a city of tremendous resources, including a powerful and progressive political tradition that historically made our region a cockpit for the struggle for abolition, women's rights, civil rights, and the rights of indigenous people.

In the days of the Erie Canal, Syracuse was an engine of the industrial revolution in the United States. Once the canal was built and Syracuse could export its salt in bulk, the city's population exploded. Over the 30-year period from 1820 to 1850, it grew from 250 to 22,000.¹¹ The salt industry gave rise to a chemical industry and later to a broadly based manufacturing sector, so that 70 years after the Canal was built, Syracuse produced everything from clocks and china to soda ash and steam engines.

¹¹ Peter L. Bernstein, *Wedding of the Waters; The Erie Canal and the Making of a Great Nation* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005) 361.

Washington Street, Syracuse circa 1933

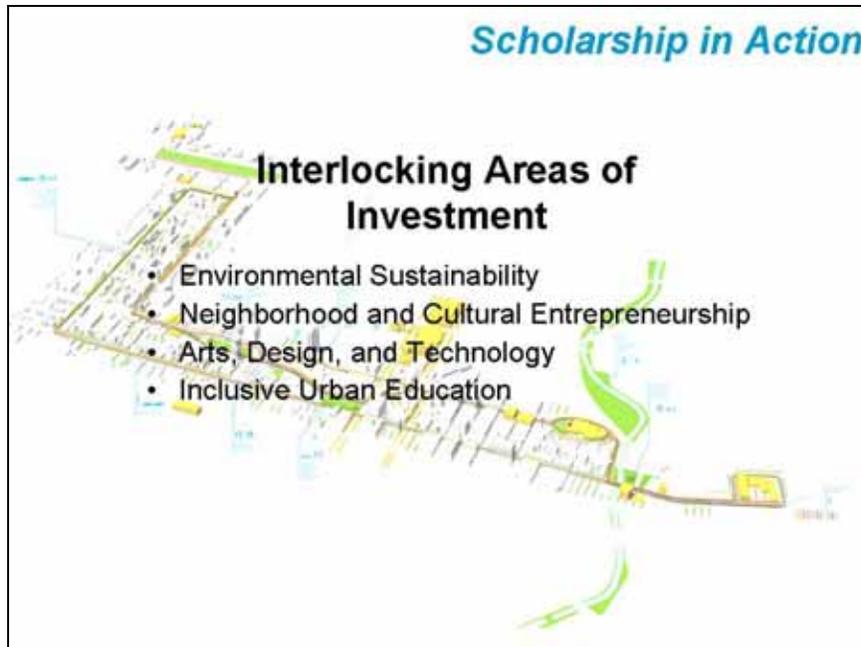


The Erie Canal was more than a masterpiece of engineering. The history of the Canal is a powerful reminder that a small group of committed people can make a tremendous difference—can, literally, re-route history. It was created by networks of interest, and it, in turn, created new business, social, and even religious networks¹² by connecting a series of communities, each nested in its own geographical area.

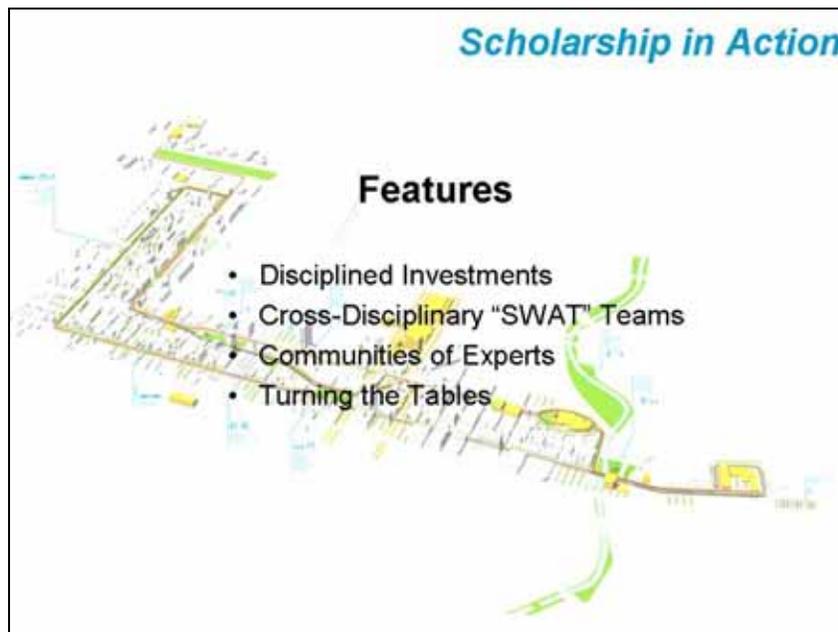
Today, those networks are global in reach, in part due to the information revolution, but also because cities like Syracuse attract waves of immigrants, particularly in our case from Eastern Europe and Africa, ready to join with the residents of our many challenged neighborhoods to take up the mantle of the post-industrial revolution. The talent is here, in those neighborhoods and newly arrived, to turn things around if we commit to economic and educational empowerment.

We have the history and the confidence to believe that our city, our university, and our region, pooling this creative talent, can make our area rebound in ways that count, in ways that will contribute to knowledge, discovery, education, economic revitalization and social justice.

¹² Bernstein, 34-35.



Scholarship in Action has four interlocking areas of principal focus: urban environmental sustainability; arts, design, and technology; neighborhood economic and cultural entrepreneurship; and inclusive urban education. We work with local citizens groups, public officials and agencies, not-for-profits, artists and business people, and we use the resources of the University and the city interchangeably, moving physically up and down the “hill” on which our campus sits.



We involve scholars and students from disciplines across the university (well beyond the traditionally engaged social science, health, and public affairs disciplines), and they learn from and work with “communities of experts” with local knowledge and history to share. We follow a

disciplined strategy of investment, choosing areas of engagement in which we have disciplinary strength on campus, interest and need in the community, willing partners across all sectors (public and private), and communities of experts (around the nation and the world) to support the sustainability of these collaborative projects.

Here are some examples:

- In our Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems, faculty and students from 12 institutions across Upstate New York join with 140 firms and other local experts to work on indoor environmental quality, water resources, and renewable energy. Indeed, the Center's new headquarters will be emblematic of its work: for its site, we are reclaiming a brownfield in downtown Syracuse, former home to the original Smith-Corona typewriter factory, and adjacent to the former site of the original Erie Canal. The Center's projects draw from an array of the sciences and engineering disciplines, but also from public policy and the law, as well as architecture and design. Of course, environmental justice questions pervade these projects, so this provides an opportunity to engage the contributions of the Onondaga Nation to the remediation of Onondaga Lake, and the expertise of our community health centers as we address the ills of our urban ecosystem. While much of the focus of the Center is embedded in our City and region, the problems and proposed solutions resonate easily with similar projects around the globe, from Beijing to Capetown, where faculty members are also engaged.

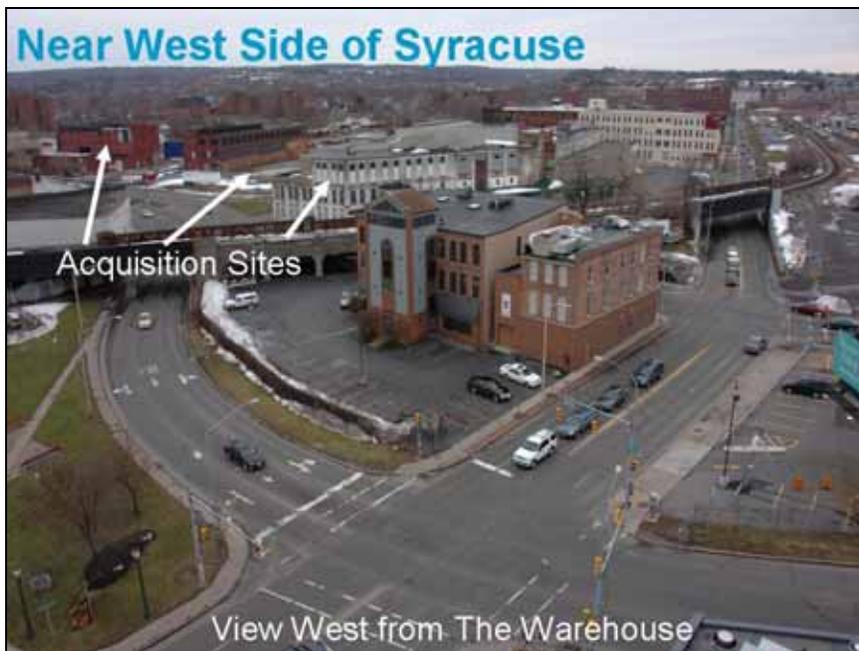


- As I noted earlier, the same local-global resonance is apparent at the South Side Innovation Center—our business incubator in the heart of one of Syracuse's most challenged neighborhoods, where minority and women entrepreneurs are actively pursuing start-ups through micro-credit loans, entrepreneurial “bootcamp” training, and space to work. Here, they transform their businesses from dreams to reality by working with faculty and students from business, information studies, visual and performing arts,

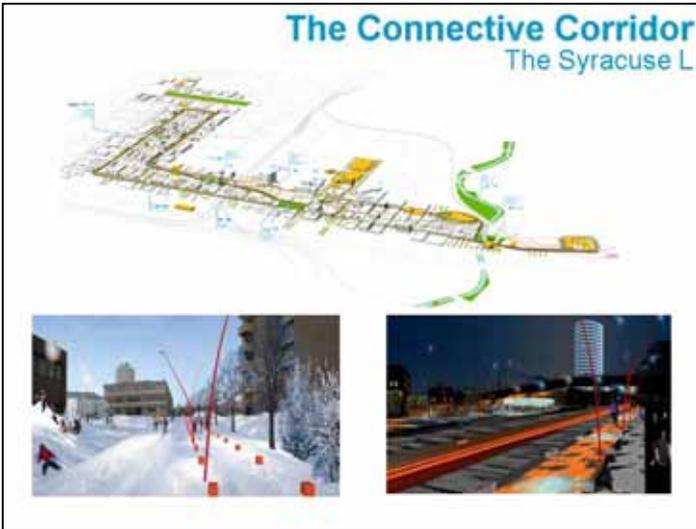
journalism, law, and other relevant disciplines. In one ambitious project, they are teaming up with experts from Nelson Farms—an agricultural products marketing venture established by one of our regional partner institutions, Morrisville State College—to produce a test kitchen in this South Salina Street facility to move products from family recipes to business successes. The ever-expanding South Side Entrepreneurs Association—now a 110-member neighborhood organization—is also looking to the next generation with a youth entrepreneurship program, while the South Side Community Coalition and our information studies faculty are creating a Technology Center for South Side residents to connect with the world, and our journalists are collaborating on a Community Newspaper to give a voice to the neighborhood in the media.



- At the Warehouse, our newly renovated 135,000 square foot facility in the West Side of downtown Syracuse, our architects, artists and designers work, study, and teach every day, and collaborate in the community to redesign and revitalize the urban landscape. The Upstate: A Center for Design, Research, and Real Estate, for example, is joining forces with a neighborhood 501c3, the Chamber of Commerce, and several corporate and city partners to do renovations of abandoned warehouses and turn them into the centerpiece of an Arts, Technology, and Design Quarter. Inspiration for these projects comes also from our architecture and design programs in Florence and London, where similar revitalization through design is occurring.



Following the lead of other cities, we are also building in Syracuse a new “Connective Corridor,” an urban pathway of redevelopment, transportation, and design that will highlight the cultural organizations and venues from the university hill down to the Near West Side Arts Quarter—highlighting the richness of the community-based arts infrastructure that has persistently thrived in Syracuse.



One such thriving cultural icon is our Community Folk Art Center, celebrating its 35th year in a new home on the path of the Connective Corridor, and showcasing together the cultural life of our long-standing and our newly arriving communities of color in Syracuse.



- Finally, as we think about the future of this city, with its growing multi-cultural and multi-ethnic global mix, we turn to educating the next generations. At public schools across the Syracuse City School District, faculty and students from five colleges and universities in Syracuse are collaborating in a comprehensive Partnership for Better Education to improve literacy and inclusion. Among a suite of programs, we are: adopting smaller learning communities in each high school, focused on the arts, entrepreneurship, and science and technology; creating early college high school experiences on our campuses; mentoring middle school students in Saturday and Summer Academies; recruiting and training a cadre of teachers specifically for our City schools; and working on whole school reform in K-8 schools. In each case, these programs are designed with the themes of literacy and inclusion in mind, as Syracuse has been a community with a long history of pioneering activism on literacy and disabilities rights.¹³ Once again, the local-global resonances in this work are many, as movements to promote literacy and disability rights know no geographical boundaries.

¹³ See for example Burton Blatt and Fred Kaplan, *Christmas in Purgatory: A Photographic Essay on Mental Retardation* (New York: Allyn and Bacon, Inc, 1966); and the work of Syracuse community activist and SU alumna, Ruth Colvin, who founded Literacy Volunteers of America, for which she recently received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, 2006, from President Bush.



In all four of these strategic arenas, we intend that our collaborations be sustainable over the long haul and yet be dynamic, evolving in an agile way, in terms of partners and focus, to meet the most pressing needs and take advantage of local history and knowledge, our academic strengths, and new opportunities arising as the City of Syracuse reinvents itself. A crucial feature of all of these partnerships is that they manifest themselves not only programmatically, but physically. In each case, Syracuse University has invested its own financial resources to leverage the creation or renovation of physical space that lies beyond our traditional campus and that is genuinely shared with our partners from all sectors.

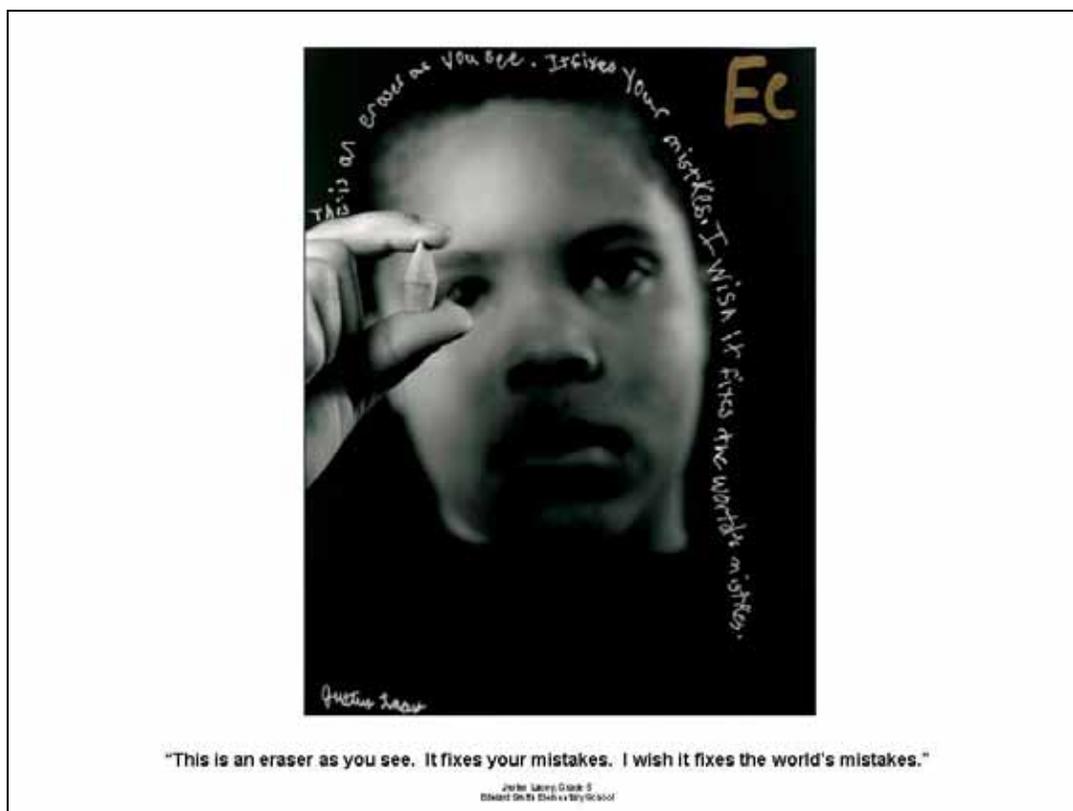
Physical engagement of this kind, in itself, provides benefits to all partners. In a city such as Syracuse, struggling to redefine itself in the post-industrial era, it has provided urban anchors of rejuvenation around which economic development is now rippling, benefiting all sectors of the community. It also has profound pedagogical benefits for our students, providing them with the means to “get out of the bubble” of the campus, as David Scobey, Director of the Harwood Center at Bates College, puts it, not only physically, but psychologically.¹⁴ And when they get out of the bubble, they often find the tables turned on who is the “expert” and who is the “novice,” who is teaching whom, and where the lessons of life and the lessons of the classroom begin and end. The same is true for the faculty as they pursue *innovation that matters*, to borrow IBM’s term,¹⁵ with communities of experts whose experience and knowledge help redefine the body of relevant disciplinary knowledge as well as change the face of our city and region, and connect with similar projects around the globe.

¹⁴ David Scobey, “Getting Out of the Bubble: or The Subjective Necessity for Civic Engagement,” paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, New Orleans, LA, January 2007.

¹⁵ *Innovation That Matters*, IBM Conference, Rome, 2006.

By building up from the local to what Scobey calls “new, place-based forms of intellectual cosmopolitanism,”¹⁶ we are able to make discoveries with wide applicability, and educate our students in a global context, while still keeping faith with the public interest of our communities. Even more importantly, we actively demonstrate to our students the full meaning of citizenship and communal responsibility, allowing them to learn about the knowledge economy not from a distance, but up close. Everyone then begins to develop an organic and direct understanding of what it means to pool talents, work together, and keep an eye on public gains, rather than merely private ones. In so doing, we do as much to change our institutions, by bringing the outside in, as we do to change the lives and livelihoods of our communities, at home and abroad.

In a global knowledge economy, inter-dependence is a recipe for success that public scholarship teaches, even as it bucks the trends of individualism and insularity evident everywhere. We may be good at accessing information, 24/7 on the World-Wide Web, but we need much more intense commitments to really bring the right messages home. And sometimes those messages are delivered by the least powerful amongst us. Consider the words of Justus Lacey, a fifth-grader at Edward Smith Elementary School, engaged in one of our literacy-through-the-arts programs.¹⁷ Justus took the following photograph and wrote his message around it.



¹⁶ David Scobey, “Putting the Academy in its Place,” *Places* 14 no.3 Spring 2002.

¹⁷ This approach to giving voice to children has been employed most famously by Wendy Ewald. See, for example, *Portraits and Dreams: Photographs and Stories by Children of the Appalachians*, New York: Writers and Readers Publications, Inc., 1985.

It reads, “This is an eraser as you see. It fixes your mistakes. I wish it fixes the world’s mistakes.”

Children like Justus Lacey are indeed the real canaries in the mines of our democratic cultures. And they do more than show us the toxins; they call upon us to erase their toxic impact. In this effort, no one has rallied our energy more in recent times than did the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. So, as we look today and tomorrow toward ways that universities can combat (or even erase) poverty, racism, environmental degradation, and inter-cultural conflict, let’s not be weak of will or deterred by what King famously called: “(Our) high blood pressure of creeds and anemia of deeds.” It is time for action, and that requires interaction, at home and around the globe.¹⁸

¹⁸ From speech delivered at the eleventh annual convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, August 16, 1967.