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Scholarship in action: transforming community and higher education

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Now is the time, as the Kellogg Commission has observed, for colleges and universities "to reshape our historic agreement with the American people so that it fits the times that are emerging instead of the times that have passed." \(^1\) In the new world being forged by shared knowledge, universities are superbly positioned to transform themselves and their communities.

Public or private, an institution of higher education is a public good. At our best,

- We educate fully informed and committed citizens.
- We provide access to opportunity.
- We strengthen democratic institutions.
- We create innovation that matters, and we share knowledge generously.
- We inform and engage public opinion and debate.
- We cultivate and sustain public intellectuals.

Indeed, a publicly focused mission for higher education was enshrined formally when President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act of 1862, which established the foundation for a national system of state colleges and universities, including the University of California, which would bring higher education to millions. It created the land grant university system to conserve, encourage, and promote agriculture at a time when it employed more than half the nation’s population and affected the prosperity of the nation as a whole.

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2 U.S. National Archives & Records Administration, Morrill Act (1862) online at http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?doc=33

Appropriately enough, we felt reverberations of Lincoln’s boldness less than a month ago when President Obama, in his inaugural address, called for us once again to roll up our sleeves, to collaborate to “remake America,” raising the possibility of a central role for colleges and universities in scientific research, in reversing our nation’s failing schools, in restoring prosperity to our once-booming cities and sharing our knowledge and our prosperity on the global stage. The new stimulus package that he and the Congress are shaping provides the opportunity to enshrine a vision of universities---private and public---as public goods once again.

And so we find ourselves on new ground, inspired by the possibilities for change, thinking about roles we can and should play in a new America. In this, we’re invited by the social-legal theorist, Susan Sturm at Columbia to consider the “architecture of inclusion,” to think carefully about how we deliberately design and give substance and solidity to the inclusive communities and democratic culture befitting a diverse society.4

From Our Past to our Present

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As we consider this new time for engagement, it is helpful to begin with our institutional and regional histories as a guide to where we may look for opportunities now.

Syracuse, sometimes nicknamed Salt City because it developed in an area with large salt deposits, began as a small center of trade for the indigenous people, the Onondaga. The arrival of the Erie Canal caused an explosion in the city's population as the industrial revolution came through on its way to the cities of the Great Lakes. Today our city struggles with the after effects of the flight of industry and population, Syracuse University might be private, but it is serving as an anchor in the city's public revitalization, moving forward in uncharted waters.

In the early 20th Century, when Davis was established as a separate campus of the University of California, it was considered the best farmland in the state, chosen for its soil, climate, environment, and a location well suited to address two of the most vital issues in California agriculture: rainfall and irrigation. Over the years, UC Davis has continued its tradition of excellence in agriculture and veterinary medicine and expanded to a host of other disciplines, expanding across academic silos to take up such issues as environmental justice. At the same time, it has made the most of its proximity to the state capital in Sacramento.

As universities, we are different, but as we seek the way forward, we are asking the same question: In this hyperlinked society and knowledge economy, how can we---how should we---partner with others?

We know the myths that resonate in both our states, frontier stories of the rugged individuals who made it on their own, rags to riches. But the truth is that prosperity for all has been built collaboratively: on the railroads that linked our coasts together, to cite one example, or the construction of the Erie Canal in an era when there were no engineers, just amateurs making it up as they went along. And many of the groups who helped map, found, and build this nation---the indigenous people, the slaves, the railroad workers from China---were killed, despised, or discarded. So as we think about partnerships today, in a society with vast chasms between the haves and the have-nots, we must make room for groups that too often have been left behind.

Authenticity

We're trying to do this in Syracuse, and it's an effort that engages the very best of the university and the community. Our work grows authentically from scholarly interests, and it directly addresses community needs. Our scholars are crossing boundaries, working on the frontiers of their disciplines and collaborating with partners outside the university in pursuit of new opportunities, seeking "solutions" that will carry weight as alternatives to the untapped potential, the violence, and the crushing of hope that we see all around us at home and around the globe.
Students play a critical role, learning and doing at the same time. So do our very best scholars. In most cases, we'd be hard-pressed to say which came first or what takes precedence---the scholarship or the action. That is why we call our vision Scholarship in Action.

We began our venture into public scholarship with a year of conversations, on and off campus, about the nature of both the university and its communities---we called it *Exploring the Soul of Syracuse*. In many ways this exploration was about place and how it could become a stage for creative innovation that would draw upon our institutional strengths – from urban design to green technology to entrepreneurship to inclusive education to ethnic studies to public communication to theater – and would also make visible the assets of our region, its neighborhoods, history, public memory, inter-cultural dialogues, and more.

In Syracuse, our legacy as an older industrial city has brought tragedy and challenge: we have neighborhoods that are struggling with failing schools, decaying landscapes, and few jobs. But our inheritance from the glory days of the past also includes powerful assets: glorious downtown buildings, a remarkable infrastructure in the visual and performing arts, and a powerful tradition of activism in the cause of social justice.
Syracuse was an important station on the Underground Railroad--- the home of the great freedom fighter Harriet Tubman's lies half an hour away. Our region was a cockpit in the struggle for women's rights and suffrage, epitomized by the hub of activity from nearby Seneca Falls. It was and is the home of the Onondaga Nation, the capital of the historic Haudenosaunee confederacy that most of us know by the (derogatory) name the French gave them, the Iroquois, meaning "black snakes."

Our historical landscape offers faculty and students from many disciplines, as well as residents of our communities, chances to know each other and collaborate in ways that enrich a broad public.

In our area, the Onondaga and other members of the Haudenosaunee have not been well known---in fact, they've been shunned and ignored---in recent decades, even though they once inhabited our entire region and had a powerful influence on our nation's government and culture. Their confederation served as a model for our federal system of government, and their clan mothers inspired our suffragettes.

We've begun a partnership that includes a scholarship program, the Haudenosaunee Promise, that's brought record numbers of indigenous students to our campus. Our College of Law has established a Center on Indigenous Law. As part of our collaboration, Haudenosaunee leaders, artists, and scholars have come to campus and addressed overflow audiences during public discussions on topics ranging from native land rights to indigenous religion, music, and traditions. We share a powerful commitment to cleaning up Onondaga Lake in downtown Syracuse. It's a site that the Haudenosaunee regard as sacred. Thanks to industrial dumping and acid rain, it's also a Superfund site.

Thirty miles west of Syracuse, archaeologist Doug Armstrong (from our Maxwell School), an expert on the African Diaspora in the Caribbean, discovered, at first by chance and then in long hours of digging, analysis, and interpretation, a little-known chapter in the life of Harriet Tubman, her work as a very old woman to found and run a care facility for the elderly on her farm. Armstrong and scores of students---from industrial design in the College of Visual and Performing Arts as well as anthropology --- have been working in partnership with AME Zion Church that inherited the Tubman home. They're also talking with the National Park Service about making the site a national park.

Within the city of Syracuse, Kendall Phillips, associate professor of communication and rhetorical studies at our College of Visual and Performing Arts, is engaged in an ongoing public memory project focusing on how memories of the past impact our political and cultural lives in the present. The focus is Grace Episcopal Church, of which Phillips is a member.

Fifty years ago, as an all-white church, it took in the congregants of St. Philip's Church, the African American Episcopal Mission that was closed. St. Philip's was situated in the 15th ward, a large and vibrant African American neighborhood that was
bulldozed to make room for Interstate-81, an ugly elevated highway that served for years as a barrier between downtown and the universities and medical centers that lie a mere 15-minute walk up the hill.

This year we are working through several partnerships, a Black History Preservation Project on the city's South Side and a class, Black Syracuse, collecting, organizing, and exhibiting historic materials. We hope to get the school district involved. Ultimately, these groups would like to develop a virtual library and museum of black history.

This is work that crosses many communities and disciplines. A few hours east of us, in Troy, NY, our students have been involved in a project called The Ghost of the Liberty Street Church. The first minister of this church, the Rev. Henry Highland Garnet, was internationally known in his day for calling upon people to resist slavery. The site of the church is now a parking lot. The Rensselaer Historical Society gave the students old photos of the church, and they created an inflatable life sized scale model, installed it on the site, and animated it with video projections representing Rev. Garnet and his words: "Let your motto be resistance! Resistance! Resistance!" a call for justice from a time that has been largely forgotten.

That call continues. Recently, seven "ordinary" (though extraordinary) Syracuse citizens---some of them immigrants and others deeply embedded for generations---spoke and acted in the play Tales from the Salt City---created and directed by Ping Chong and produced at Syracuse Stage, an independent arts organization, connected to SU through our drama department. What was so moving and so galvanizing about the performance were the interwoven threads of their stories, their struggles for a secure place, their visions of hope, and their power to cross boundaries.

These stories keep coming, as the global lives in the local. In recent years, Syracuse has welcomed thousands of refugees, from Bosnia, the Congo, and Somalia, to name just a few. Therefore, as places, we can have many possible histories. If we are to build authentic connections---and this is true on any campus and in any community---we must acknowledge and give voice to these experiences. To know each other is to know each other's stories.
Challenges and Standards

Scholarship in Action

- Reciprocity on the two-way street
- Prepare our students for the world
- Reward public scholarship
- Build an “architecture of inclusion”* in a zero-sum world
- Sustained impact on and off campus


We have faced a series of challenges from the very beginning. We want to transcend the history of unidirectional engagement between universities and their communities, in which "we" were always positioning ourselves as the only legitimate experts, telling "them" how to fix their problems or insisting that "we" fix them, as if we were auto mechanics or something. We needed to create reciprocity and a sense of trust.

We also need to find ways to reward public scholarship. We recognize that scholars are connected to the systems of value---the micro-economies---of their disciplines, and that many current faculty members have identities that are built on long-entrenched understandings of what "counts" as scholarship.5

At the same time, it is imperative that public scholarship engages our students in high-impact learning experiences that will prepare them for the world in which they are now living. We want to engage them in learning that expands their capacity for empathy,

fires their imagination and entrepreneurial spirit. We don't necessarily want all of them to be entrepreneurs, as such, but we want them prepared and willing to try new things, to have the courage to take risks. As part of this effort, we must find and recruit students who'll respond to higher education constructed in this new way.

We need to demonstrate to our stakeholders that this is not only a good idea, but actually mission critical, even in the midst of global economic turmoil, and this means ensuring that the collaborative work we do now will have a sustained impact on both campus and community.

We know we are living in a world that is inclined to view the prosperity of different groups as a zero-sum game: Their win is our loss. It's a difficult climate to build an architecture of inclusion and opportunity, but this is what we must do.

Taking all of these considerations into account, we've set some criteria for the university's investment and involvement in public scholarship.

- Projects have to be large in scale and complex in partners.
- They need to engage our faculty and students in work that furthers their disciplines while also addressing pressing issues of the city.
- They need to be able to draw (as a magnet would) collaborators from all sectors – business, neighborhoods, government, schools, not-for-profits.
- We require a strong synergy between the “work” of the campus and the “work” of the community to ensure that our collaborations are sustainable, that they are far more than one-shot service learning projects.
- We want projects that can dramatically increase the creative engagement of campus and community, that can eventually change how Syracuse looks and functions. We have kept an eye toward taking down the barriers – both real and symbolic – that divide people and obscure hope.
As part of our effort to make the university an anchor in the community, we began working with a wide range of collaborators to build an arts zone, something that can be seen as well as experienced on the landscape of our city. We're calling it the Connective Corridor. It links downtown Syracuse with the university and other institutions up on the hill. All of the city's major cultural and civic institutions, as well as its grass-roots arts and cultural organizations, are located on or near this strip, as well as important centers of technology.
The Connective Corridor is a two-way street that is both physical and intellectual, in which the conversation goes both ways between the university and its many collaborators, from schoolchildren to architects, from business students to community entrepreneurs.

Last month, for example, in what we're calling the civic strip of the Corridor, we premiered what we're told is the largest urban video project in the nation. We're lighting the entire sides of three buildings with artwork and video that will be projected from nightfall until 11 p.m. every night of the year. One of the screens is larger than the biggest screen in Times Square.
The project made its debut on a freezing, snowy night when you had to wear a coat and mittens to look. Denise Heckman, the design professor working with the project, said: "It's kind of like throwing your television out on the snow, making it 100 times as big, and then letting people who don't have any expensive production facilities send you content."

The technology involved is specifically designed to allow two-way communication. You could describe this as a giant YouTube, not a movie theater. It's not just about the system talking to you. It gives the community a voice. The walls can be anything people want them to be, including screens for public debate which, as the mayor said at the opening, "kind of worries me," although the submissions do have to meet the project's artistic standards and be approved by the city's new Public Art Commission.

We've invited local artists and arts organizations to workshops where they can discuss project ideas and simple technical specifications for using the venues, but these venues are also for learning. We're asking teachers from kindergarten through high school to imagine assignments that can go public, not only in drawing and painting, but also in the performing arts, history, or science. How often to we ask students to design things or create are that are never seen by the general public? One of our history projects is now in the pipeline, bringing SU students together with students from Henniger, a Syracuse public high school, to gather historical images and re-photograph them for display.
As we began thinking developing this Corridor, this arts zone, we wanted an anchor on the end that was farthest away from our campus up on the hill. We purchased one of the ugliest buildings in town, an old furniture warehouse that looked like a giant gray cube of cement, and asked the architect Richard Gluckman to transform it. Today, it's filled with windows, light, wonderful rooms, a café, community arts spaces and public gallery spaces.

Hundreds of students take buses up and down the Corridor every day, and many of them stay downtown late into the evening. The Warehouse area has come alive and is anchoring galleries, shops, downtown condominiums and new office buildings.
Meanwhile, the Corridor has expanded away from the university and the center of downtown to the Near West Side, one of Syracuse’s poorest neighborhoods with a long-standing Latino/a community, where many new partnerships have formed to do Green renovations on dozens of homes for existing residents, renovate old and vacant warehouses for artists and performance spaces, build schools as centers of community and sustainable food markets and La Casita (a Latino/a Cultural Center).

This neighborhood is now called the Syracuse Art Life and Technology District (SALT), and with help from SU, it's now inviting artists from around the region, the state, and the nation to consider moving to Syracuse to be part of this growing community.

The Warehouse itself has been a vital site for scholarship in action, first as a temporary home for our School of Architecture and its Upstate Design Center. It now houses, not only Architecture’s Upstate Center, but all our design programs, from industrial to communication design, from the College of Visual and Performing Arts. The Warehouse is also home to a new interdisciplinary Collaboration Laboratory, CO-LAB, in which students collaborate in imagining solutions to real-life problems.

Last fall, COLAB partnered with the Chamber of Commerce in a charette to conceptualize new retail uses for ground floor spaces in a number of vacant store fronts downtown. Graduate and undergraduates students in the fields of interior design, architecture, retail management, geography and law created visuals, floor plans, interior layouts, maps and other strategies to be used by the Chamber and others in attracting new
retail to downtown, and the results were unveiled to community members at a reception in the Warehouse.

An important element of Scholarship in Action is process, the way in which it addresses a fundamental requirement of modern life and of higher education: the ability to talk, empathize, and understand each other, as individuals and as members of groups, and to find ways to expand our capacity to do this.

This was evident in a COLAB class where students were asked to create objects that interact with each other and use technology to extend the reach of the human body. Two of the students, Lily Chong and Matt Kalish, were thinking about interactive toys, perhaps ones with eyes that lighted up. Then one day, during a critique of student projects, someone brushed aside one idea by saying "That's so gay." There was a brief debate afterwards about whether this was offensive, but Lily and Matt left the class feeling there must be some way to acknowledge distress within a group and immediately take on the elephant in the room.

So they imagined toy elephants that could communicate with wireless chips. The eyes of the elephant would light up if someone squeezed it for three seconds, and then the eyes of all the other elephants in the room would light up, too, without anyone knowing who started it. Lily and Matt have produced two prototypes and have applied for a grant to produce more and to market them. Lily told The New York Times that she is a resident
advisor on campus and that she can imagine using the elephants in the inter-group dialogue circles that she runs in the residence halls, changing the group dynamics instantly.6

Innovation, discovery, and collaboration are vital elements of the two-way street of Scholarship in Action, and they demonstrate both the applicability of our expertise to work in the community, and the importance of this work for our scholarship and for life on campus. Clearly the arts, technology, and community renewal are directly relevant to this vision. But so are entrepreneurship and two vital issues of social justice: inclusive public education and environmental sustainability.

Environmental Sustainability and Entrepreneurship

In Upstate New York, environmental damage has been stamped on the landscape in ways we can't ignore, through pollution and acid rain. One survey of the lakes in the Adirondacks showed that 346 lakes—24 percent of the total—did not contain fish. One of those lakes was Onondaga Lake in downtown Syracuse.

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SU faculty members and students have been helping with the remediation of the lake, where the goal is to return the fishery to a condition that the Onondagas (and others) can consume the fish. They've also collaborated with students and faculty from a host of other universities, taking measurements of acid rain and creating theoretical models to help citizens, policymakers, public officials, and the corporate world assess what will—or will not—clean up the contamination.

Clean water is a major focus of the Center of Excellence in Environmental & Energy Systems, a new center now under construction on a brownfield site near the Connective Corridor. It's a university-industry collaboration to work on a sustainable future. Members of the center are addressing global challenges in two other principal areas: clean and renewable energy and indoor environmental quality.

We've been able to connect our concern with environmental sustainability with our determination to become involved in the economic and cultural renaissance of our city and region. Through a grant from the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, we have established a campus-community entrepreneurship initiative, the Enitiative, to provide contacts, resources, and funding support for entrepreneurial education and innovation in Central New York.

Out of 110 projects currently supported by Enitiative grants, nine focus on green technologies. One of them is a student green energy cooperative, a project involving
science students from the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry and business students from SU's Whitman School, working with faculty members from both universities. Michael Kelleher, director of renewable energy systems at ESF, initiated the project, and representatives of the business community are serving as advisers. The goal is to deliver campus-produced biodiesel fuel to operate vehicles at both universities.

Jessica Bohn, one of the ESF graduate students involved, is already spending her workdays in a small biodiesel processing plant, an ESF greenhouse, that will serve as the project's home base. On Mondays, she and a student volunteer make the rounds of the SU dining centers to pick up the oil, typically 50 to 100 gallons each week.---Yes, it smells like french fries!---- From every 55 gallons of waste oil they can produce 45 gallons of biodiesel, a clean, inexpensive and renewable fuel, and 10 gallons of glycerol, a byproduct that can be used to make soap and other products.

The Enitiative is also involved in the city's South Side, one of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in Syracuse---and, in fact, in New York State---but one with tremendous spirit and community-based organizations, and a vast pool of untapped talent of all kinds. Here SU students and faculty from all over campus, lead by our Whitman School’s Entrepreneurship Center, are working with minority and women entrepreneurs, some of them on their own premises and some as tenants in another renovated downtown structure, a business incubator that we call the South Side Innovation Center.
A wide range of new businesses have come to life in the SSIC -- restaurants, a test-kitchen for family recipes, a newsstand, an online wig boutique, to name only a few, and a renewable energy company that landed such a large contract this month it had to hire 12 more employees and move to larger offices.

*Inclusive Public Education*

A critical part of encouraging and sustaining our collaboration with wide sectors of our community is engaging and attracting the next generation, on campus and in the schools of our communities. Schools are centers of community hope (and too often of dismay). Like many universities, we have a substantial presence in the Syracuse City Schools. Hundreds of SU students engage in our Literacy Corp and our Literacy through the Arts Programs, working to help creative work flourish in wildly under-resourced urban schools and decaying school buildings.
Recently we began something even more ambitious to turn our urban schools around. This is a district wide school reform project, in collaboration with the Say Yes to Education Foundation, Inc and the Syracuse City School District, that calls the achievement gap what it really is – an opportunity gap – and focuses on the opportunities that inner city students miss which their middle-class peers in nearby suburban schools take to full advantage.  

As part of this comprehensive school reform project, which we call “Syracuse Say Yes to Education and Economic Development,” we draw upon the latest research-based strategies to address in a comprehensive manner the many roadblocks that keep students from thriving in school. In addition to the academic barriers, it works to remove the socio-emotional, health, and financial hurdles that too often stand in the way of graduation and college. Starting in kindergarten, students and their families across the district will experience the supports that can make schools centers of community and of hope, including the promise of full college tuition for students who graduate and qualify for admission to one of over twenty private institutions and the campuses of the State University of New York and the City University of New York. This is the kind of public-private partnership that can potentially turn things around for a whole generation of talented children who represent the future in our communities, our democracy, and our global economy.

And speaking of the global economy, one of the signature features of Scholarship in Action is that what we do locally, whether it is reclaiming our environment or turning our schools around, resonates in cities and communities, and with scholars and students, around the world. We see this at Syracuse everyday, as visiting lecturers and colleagues bring the world to campus, and we find a striking intersection between what they are doing half across the world and what we are doing downtown. Wangari Maathai’s Green Belt movement in Kenya speaks to the regeneration of Onondaga Lake, just as Mohammad Yunus’ micro-credit loan program in Bangladesh serves as a model for our entrepreneurship work on the South Side of Syracuse. And when Shen Wei Dance Arts comes for a residency in Syracuse soon, lighting up the stage of one of downtown’s grand old theaters, as it did in the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, the middle and high school students in our Literacy through the Arts Program in the City Schools will be inspired anew to gain voice through creative work, as will we all.
President Obama’s inspiring call to action to remake America was a call that resonated around the globe, and in an earlier era, President Lincoln’s Morrill Act had widespread ramifications. So too, in its own much more modest way, the call for colleges and universities to serve as anchor institutions and transform themselves by transforming their communities, has many partners world-wide. For all of us are called upon, as a fifth grader in the Syracuse City Schools, Justus Lacey suggested in his digital photography and poetry assignment, to “fix the world’s problems” – and if we can’t do that, we surely can still make a difference at home.