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Scholarship in Action: The Case for Engagement

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Scholarship in Action: The Case for Engagement

Chancellor Nancy Cantor¹

Taking Public Scholarship Seriously

Momentum is growing to take public scholarship seriously² as a movement that will “challenge and reshape the relationship between our colleges and universities and the society of which they are a part.”³

As the Kellogg Commission said at the dawn of this new millennium, “The irreducible idea is that we [American higher education] exist to advance the common good. . . the fundamental challenge with which we struggle is how 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.”⁴

Tonight I want to make the case for bold, imaginative, reciprocal, and sustained engagements between colleges and universities and their many constituent communities, local as well as global. If we intend to pursue the vision of the university as a public good, with broad benefits for our knowledge society---especially for the understanding and practice of democracy and the values of diversity, social justice and peace---we must initiate and support these new kinds of engagements. And we must extend the practice of them from their historical roots in the great public land-grant universities and community colleges of our nation to the private colleges and universities in which innovations of significance and citizens of the future are also nurtured today.

These more outward-looking engagements bring new forms of scholarship and new scholarly arrangements. They stretch the boundaries of our campuses and test our notions of who is a scholar and what scholarship is. This evening I would also like to suggest ways to create and nurture these connections.

Of course, universities have always been engaged in what Professor Victor Bloomfield, associate vice president for public engagement at the University of Minnesota calls “universal public scholarship,” which he defines as scholarship that “benefits humanity, without a specific local context in mind, and with roots that depend on interlocking developments from researchers around the world.” As examples, he cites

¹ This is the text of a keynote address in a series on Public Scholarship presented at Wesleyan University on November 29, 2006. I wish to acknowledge the substantial collaboration of Josephine Thomas on this speech, as well as the research and technical contributions of Sonita Surratt in preparing the visuals accompanying the text.

² Nancy Cantor and Steven D. Lavine, *Taking Public Scholarship Seriously*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 9, 2006, B20.

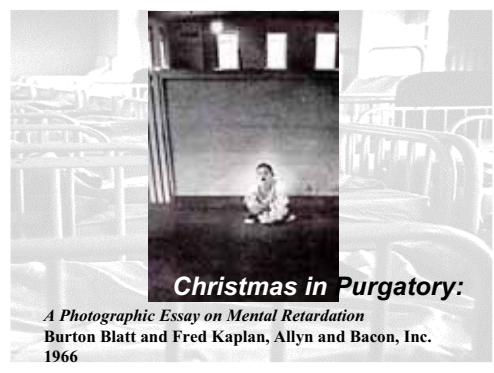
³ Tony C. Chambers, “The Special Role of Higher Education in Society,” in *Higher Education for the Public Good*, eds. Adrianna J. Kezar, Tony C. Chambers, John C. Burkhardt (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, an imprint of John Wiley & Sons Inc., 2005)³

⁴ *Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities* (2000), 9, quoted by Chambers, op.cit., 9.

the human genome project in science and the study of liberation theology in the humanities.⁵

Despite its expansive reach, the scholarly coherence and focus of such universal public scholarship has made it relatively easy for universities to house, support, evaluate, and reward. And when questions are too large for any single academic discipline to address in isolation, we have established “centers” on our campuses to address such subjects as aging, emerging technology, bioengineering, or religion and society. In turn, the work of these multidisciplinary centers almost always involves reaching out to collaborations with scholars at other universities and in communities across the nation and, indeed, around the globe.

For example, at Syracuse, we are building on the legacy of a pioneer in disability studies, Burton Blatt, whose photo-expose – *Christmas In Purgatory* – led in 1970 to the signing by then-Governor of New York, Hugh Carey, of the Willowbrook Consent Decree to deinstitutionalize children with developmental disabilities, held as literal inmates in state institutions more resembling prisons than homes.



Our newly organized Burton Blatt Institute partners with universities and public policy advocates in Syracuse and across the country – in D.C., San Francisco, Atlanta, and Iowa, for example – to carry on this legacy of public scholarship and activism that advances the civil, economic, and social participation of people with disabilities.

It draws faculty and students from law, information technology, education, communications, business, social science, architecture, and public policy, and collaborates deeply and widely with policy-makers and activists in the disability communities in these locales.

Extending the “Local” Roots of Public Scholarship

As “universal public scholarship” like this reaches outward, however, we are finding ourselves increasingly on some new ground, doing what many call “local public scholarship,” situated in reciprocal and sustained partnerships between scholars and all

⁵ Julie Ellison, *Imagining America’s Tenure Team Initiative: Responsive Tenure Policies for Publicly Engaged Faculty in the Humanities, Arts, and Design*, unpublished manuscript, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI., October, 2006; Bloomfield cited here.

kinds of communities of “experts” beyond the ivory tower.⁶ In these collaborations, there is an increasing awareness of the importance of the idea of *place* and the value of historical specificity and local knowledge and needs.⁷

Local public scholarship can be swift, agile, and flexible enough to respond to what Julie Ellison, Director of the national consortium, *Imagining America: Artists and Scholars in Public Life*, describes as “the place-based” concerns and historical and contemporary realities of the communities with which universities are co-located, even as these concerns and realities are mirrored around the nation and the world.

David Scobey, Director of the Harvard Center for Community Partnerships at Bates College, has called this orientation to the local and to place, “the new cosmopolitanism.” In it, the issues of the world find a local home and a local voice, one informed both by residents of long-standing and by newly arriving immigrant groups, as they work side by side to find a secure place in cities and communities that are often also in transition. In the process, the very nature of local and global community is being transformed, with the provincial becoming cosmopolitan and the cosmopolitan rooted in the provincial.⁸

Such local public scholarship can be extremely complex. It often involves teams of people – scholars and citizens in public-private partnerships, drawing on different skills and credentials. It also crosses many sectors – academic, corporate, governmental, community. It poses problems of transportation and scheduling. It produces – or rather co-produces – scholarship that sometimes looks quite different in form than the standard peer reviewed article. It pressures universities to develop flexible new support systems, infrastructure, and policies.

Nonetheless, if universities are to continue to expand our essential role in our democracy, producing innovation that makes a difference and educating enthusiastic citizens as well as skilled technicians, we must learn to construct these local collaborations in shared “third spaces”⁹ where talented people of all backgrounds and different expertise can live and work together. We must create two-way streets for vibrant exchanges of people and ideas, and in so doing contribute actively to building communities, whether they are local communities or half way around the world.

This “third space” and the “two-way street” of collaboration may be real, virtual, or both, as happened recently in a gallery at Light Work/Community Darkrooms, a Syracuse University-community collaboration that seeks to support emerging and under-recognized artists in photography and digital media and that makes darkrooms available to the public.

⁶ I want to clarify here my use of the term “local.” I do not intend here to contrast local and global, but rather to reflect the embedding of public scholarship in partnerships with communities of experts outside the campus with deep ties to local communities, whether they are situated at home or abroad.

⁷ Julie Ellison, *Imagining America’s Tenure Team Initiative: Responsive Tenure Policies for Publicly Engaged Faculty in the Humanities, Arts, and Design*, unpublished manuscript, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI., October, 2006.

⁸ *Ibid*; Scobey cited here.

⁹ Cantor, N. & Schomberg, S. Poised between two worlds: The University as monastery and marketplace., *EDUCAUSE Review*, March/April, 2003, 38, no.2, pp. 12-21.

Earlier this month, Light Work opened an exhibit that included the work of Thilde Jensen, who had moved from New York City to rural Cortland County just south of us. She made a rather startling figure at the opening because she attended wearing the gas mask that is part of her everyday attire.



In fact, Jensen suffers from Multiple Chemical Sensitivity and is so sensitive to chemicals in the air that she cannot sit in traffic, read a book, or sit next to someone wearing perfume. Her brilliant, frightening, and touching series of photographs of herself and others who suffer from this condition is entitled “Human Canaries.” Artists are the canaries of our society, often intuiting coming events in ways that elude conventional wisdom. With her illness and her gas mask, Jensen is twice a canary.

And only a short distance from this gallery, down from the “hill” on which the University sits, the headquarters of the Syracuse Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems is going up on a brown field site downtown. The Center is a partnership between New York State, Syracuse University and 11 other educational and research institutions and more than 140 different firms working on discoveries and products related to healthy buildings, urban water resources, and our urban ecosystem.



The headquarters itself will include a pioneering “green” building that achieves the highest “Platinum” rating in the system established by the U. S. Green Building Council. The building and the site will become living laboratories for new strategies as they become available in the future. Among the topics already under study is the quality of indoor air, including the “sick building syndrome.”

Meanwhile, Jensen’s photographs bring her audiences into the presence of those who actually suffer from toxic air. Art makes us intimately aware of lives and sensitivities different from our own and of possible scenarios we might affect in the future. Her images start conversations among spectators who neither work in a laboratory nor have to wear gas masks. At the heart of public scholarship is just such a conversation that individuals have with the world, a conversation that prompts civic and scholarly action all at once.

Public Scholarship: Collaborations in the “Third Space”

The “third space” where these conversations and actions can happen is created when universities forge outward-looking connections to diverse communities, collaborating on the pressing issues of our times—from failing schools to environmental degradation to inter-religious conflict – and co-producing knowledge and cultural and commercial products that can make a difference. This work is valuable not only in transferring intellectual capital from campuses to community, but also in giving voice to communities of “experts” beyond the campus and building shared communal responsibility.

In public scholarship, the work of the world and the work of the campus intersect in three key ways that allow universities to be public goods.

(1) *Innovation that matters locally.* First, public scholarship promotes discovery work outside the ivory tower. It produces innovations that make a difference on the pressing issues of the day, especially as seen through an informed local lens.

This kind of discovery work – “innovation that matters” as IBM calls it – is a natural extension of the “universal public scholarship” that Bloomfield characterizes as benefiting humanity in a very broad way. It takes the basic questions of science or the humanities, for example, and enriches our solutions by testing them in the marketplace of local lived experience. It asks questions that have local roots as well as universal benefits. How, for example, can we tackle the urban epidemic of diabetes---even if we develop a better understanding through genomics of the disease itself---without contextualizing its spread within the race disparities in health that we see everyday in very particular forms in our local communities?

(2) *Communal responsibility.* Second, public scholarship promotes conversations on citizenship, democratic culture, and communal responsibility that change the dialogue from seeing citizenship as a matter of stakeholder rights---a view of our society as a collection of individuals with the *rights* of citizens---to seeing citizenship as an “act of community building” among citizens with *responsibilities* to each other and to our communities.

There may be times that we have the illusion, through text messaging, the media, or the internet, that we as individuals are connected more intimately and more widely than ever before. Yet, as Vartan Gregorian, president of the Carnegie Corporation of New

York, has warned, “connectivity does not guarantee communication.”¹⁰ Nor does it guarantee community.

As Richard Sennett has observed, a city is more than a place to live, shop, or play. It is a place that “implicates the way in which people derive their ethics, how one develops a sense of justice, and, most of all, how we talk with and learn from people who are unlike ourselves—which is how a human being becomes human.”¹¹ Even the term “public,” as Sennett points out, comes from the ancient Greek word for “making a city,” and this connotes more than bringing people together functionally. It means bringing together in the same place people who need each other functionally but worship different household gods. So the question that arises is: How do differing people find a way to use the word “we”?¹²

Public scholarship and the educational dialogues that it promotes create connections that are deeper and more lasting than those based simply on proximity. They forge connections -- rooted in pluralistic communication -- that cross groups and cultures and traditions to address problems that occur across the globe in ways that remain distinctly embedded in conversations in the local context.

(3) *New voices with democratizing effects.* A third and related asset of public scholarship is that it promotes the engagement of new and diverse voices at the table (from within and outside the campus) and thereby has a strong democratizing effect. As George Sanchez, a faculty member at the University of Southern California, has suggested, those who often feel relegated to the outside of our campus communities, such as faculty and students of color, emerge with more expertise and authentic voice in this agenda, as they often begin with more “standing” in the surrounding community and on the issues at hand.¹³

The same can be said for the engagement in public scholarly collaborations of residents, artists, and entrepreneurs in the many challenged neighborhoods of our communities, working to get a foothold in this knowledge economy. As they engage in these local public scholarly collaborations, their place in and centrality to building the cities and communities of our future become ever more evident.

In other words, the landscape of both the academy and the community begin simultaneously to change when the insights of new voices are heard.

Sharing Narratives in Public

At the core of this transformation is the preservation and sharing of narratives through a public process that both affirms pluralism and uncovers common ground. And

¹⁰ Vartan Gregorian, “The Pursuit of Knowledge: Grounding Technology in Both Science and Significance,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Dec. 9, 2005, B5.

¹¹ Richard Sennett, “The ‘Civitas’ of Seeing,” *The Mayors’ Institute: Excellence in City Design*, Washington D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 2002, 47.

¹² *Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹³ George Sanchez, *Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy*, Paper presented at *The John Dewey Lecture*, University of Michigan, October, 2004.

as we cultivate these conversations, the discourse changes from one *of service* to one *of collaboration, co-creation, and civic actions*.

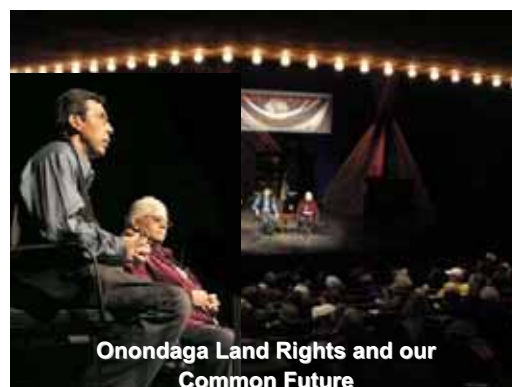


In this spirit, we have seen this happen at Syracuse, for example, as we deepen and extend our relationship with our neighbors, the Onondaga Nation. We have invited the Tadadaho, or spiritual leader, to address us in his own language, and members of the university's leadership were invited to meet with chiefs and clan mothers at the Long House of the Onondaga. We now have official emissaries to solidify and sustain the relationship and dialogue.

The Onondaga Nation was the capital of the Haudenosaunee confederacy, more widely known as the League of the Iroquois, and it once encompassed Onondaga Lake, which is sacred to them and now is designated a Superfund site from industrial pollution.

The Haudenosaunee have been deeply concerned about the fate of Onondaga Lake and have filed land claims for the Lake and for all of Syracuse, for that matter, based on the Treaty of Canandaigua signed with a representative of President George Washington.

In this, and in many areas, we have shared concerns, as our faculty working in the Center of Excellence are extensively involved in the Onondaga Lake remediation project. At the same time, we have established a Center for Indigenous Law, Governance and Citizenship, founded by Robert Odawi Porter, a law professor and the former attorney general of the Seneca Nation, to study and assist native people throughout the United States in such debates about sovereign rights.



For their part, the Haudenosaunee, working with several local groups organized as the Neighbors of the Onondaga Nation, agreed to hold a year-long series of lectures for the University and the wider community on their history, culture, politics, religion, and their land claims. Audiences have packed Syracuse Stage to hear them. Leaders of an important and historic community that has rarely been heard became our teachers and our partners, even as we made it much more possible for their students to be part of the University by creating a full scholarship program called the Haudenosaunee Promise.¹⁴ This experience has been, in every way, a two-way exchange, and the local public scholarship that is coming from this project ranges from collaborations on environmental sustainability and justice to those on indigenous law and policy, and on religion and society.

Practicing Local Public Scholarship

If we turn to what this local public scholarship looks like in practice, we could characterize it by saying it is enterprising, outward-looking, and engaged work that goes beyond the work of the “public intellectual,” beyond the work of an individual scholar addressing public issues, as important as that can be.

Public scholars across the nation are exploring “the local” in such areas as human rights discourses, site-specific art and design, and indigenous knowledge, as well as the ways in which global issues---such as migration--- affect and unfold specifically in local cities and towns. These “small projects,” as Julie Ellison suggests, may typically address big ideas, such as “democracy,” “diversity,” or “urban education.”¹⁵

Because public scholarship takes place among communities of experts, it often cuts across both the public and the private sectors and encompasses a wide range of people in a “third space” of collaboration that includes them all. As co-creators, those who see themselves as citizens rather than scholars, or as students rather than teachers, may well discover they are also superbly suited to be “experts” in collaborations that draw on different kinds of knowledge, skills, and lived experience.

From the perspective of our faculty and students engaged in this local public scholarship – this new cosmopolitanism – the enterprise itself crosses many boundaries – of discipline, geography, and roles, and changes the relationship between expert and novice, between teaching, scholarship, and civic engagement – often rolling them all in to one – and between what is “academic” and what is “real world.”

¹⁴ In recognition of the historical, political, and cultural legacies of the Haudenosaunee Nations, and to honor our growing ties with them, we created the Haudenosaunee Promise, a scholarship program offering full tuition and expenses for citizens of the historic Haudenosaunee Nations who have been admitted to SU. Students from five of the six Haudenosaunee Nations accepted our offer, and last fall our entering classes included 17 first year students and 13 transfer students who are Haudenosaunee, bringing the total number of first-year native students at SU to 44, an historic high.

¹⁵ Julie Ellison, *Imagining America's Tenure Team Initiative: Responsive Tenure Policies for Publicly Engaged Faculty in the Humanities, Arts, and Design*, unpublished manuscript, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI., October, 2006.

As faculty and students in our Whitman School of Management found when they collaborated with a new neighborhood entrepreneur to launch a shoe store, it is often difficult and perhaps pointless to distinguish who is the teacher and who is the learner. Many times, the answer is “everyone.”



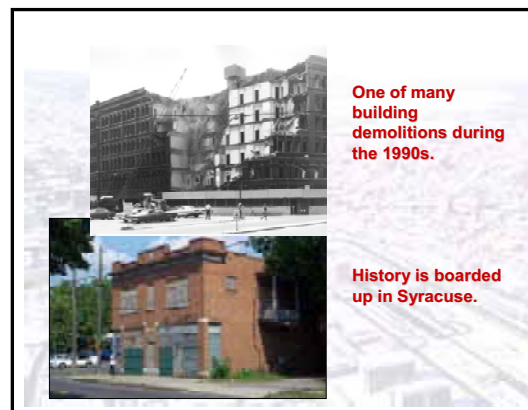
Salina Shoe Salon – Grand Opening

The opening and the store have both been great successes. And so have the other new start-ups owned by women- and members of minority groups that are collaborating in our recently opened South Side Innovation Center.

Scholarship in Action in Syracuse

Our vision of Scholarship in Action at Syracuse is one example of a strategic framework for promoting public scholarship, and I'd like to use it as an example of how such scholarship is being practiced and can be beneficial both to a community and to a university.

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.

Today, Syracuse still attracts waves of immigrants, particularly from Eastern Europe and Africa, ready to join with our inner city residents to take up the mantle of the post-industrial revolution.

We have the history and the faith to believe that our city, our university, and our region, working with others, can make our area rebound in ways that count, in ways that will contribute to knowledge, discovery, education, and many academic areas.

Our local public scholarship 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 both the campus and the city interchangeably, moving physically up and down the “hill.”

The key behind these collaborations is that they are sustainable over the long haul, cemented in both physical and programmatic structures, and yet dynamic, evolving in an agile way, in terms of partners and focus, to meet the most pressing needs and take advantage of new opportunities arising as the City of Syracuse reinvents itself.

The Arts and Public Scholarship in Syracuse

The arts and cultural expression play a special role in our vision of Scholarship in Action, and in the reinvention of our city. For despite all of its post-manufacturing challenges, Syracuse is a city that still can claim a major Opera, Symphony, Museum, and Regional Stage, as well as numerous smaller arts and cultural organizations, experimental performance spaces, and a cultural resources council of artists and culture workers of all sorts. For our part, we have broad strength in our College of Visual and Performing Arts, our School of Architecture, our humanities departments, including the Department of Fine Arts, and our Newhouse School of Public Communication, as well as numerous scholars doing interdisciplinary work in information studies, management, and public policy that also engage with the arts and cultural life of Syracuse.

And like Wesleyan, with your Green Street Arts Center, our university is trying to use the power of the arts to form and extend its creative campus in the belief that an activist cultural program can foster a tolerance for difference and a motivation to act for the public good.



We are renovating an historic structure on campus for our new Center for the Public and Collaborative Humanities, including the new home of the Imagining America consortium, and we are vigorously building local collaborations in our city and region. In the process, we have been excited and inspired by the synergies that have resulted.



The Warehouse – Before and After

One of our most recent signature projects was the transformation of an old downtown furniture warehouse, with help from the architect Richard Gluckman, a Syracuse alumnus. In less than a year the Warehouse became the beautiful home of our School of Architecture, two design programs, a new arts journalism program, and a public gallery, café, an arts education collaboration with the City’s Everson Museum, and meeting spaces for the use of the community, especially for local artists. The Warehouse is one of the many “third spaces” we are trying to create, a space where everyone can connect and feel at home.



The Warehouse also serves as the headquarters of *Upstate, A Center for Design, Research, and Real Estate*, a collaboration of our designers and architects and business people thinking about the renaissance of old manufacturing cities like Syracuse. And we are seeing the catalyzing effect of both the Warehouse itself, and the concentration of design and entrepreneurial expertise downtown, as a recent announcement made clear – O’Brien and Gere, one of the biggest and most innovative engineering firms in our area, is making the atypical reverse migration – from the suburbs to the city – and locating in a facility right next to the Warehouse.



Other signs of renewed energy for a boarded up downtown are popping up every day. For example, a new 501c3 has recently formed, with our designers, architects, and engineers joining forces with a neighborhood group, several local foundations, and leaders of economic development in Syracuse, to make a concerted effort to take the abandoned houses and warehouses in the Near West Side neighborhood adjacent to the Warehouse and attract artists from our region and elsewhere to live and work in Syracuse.

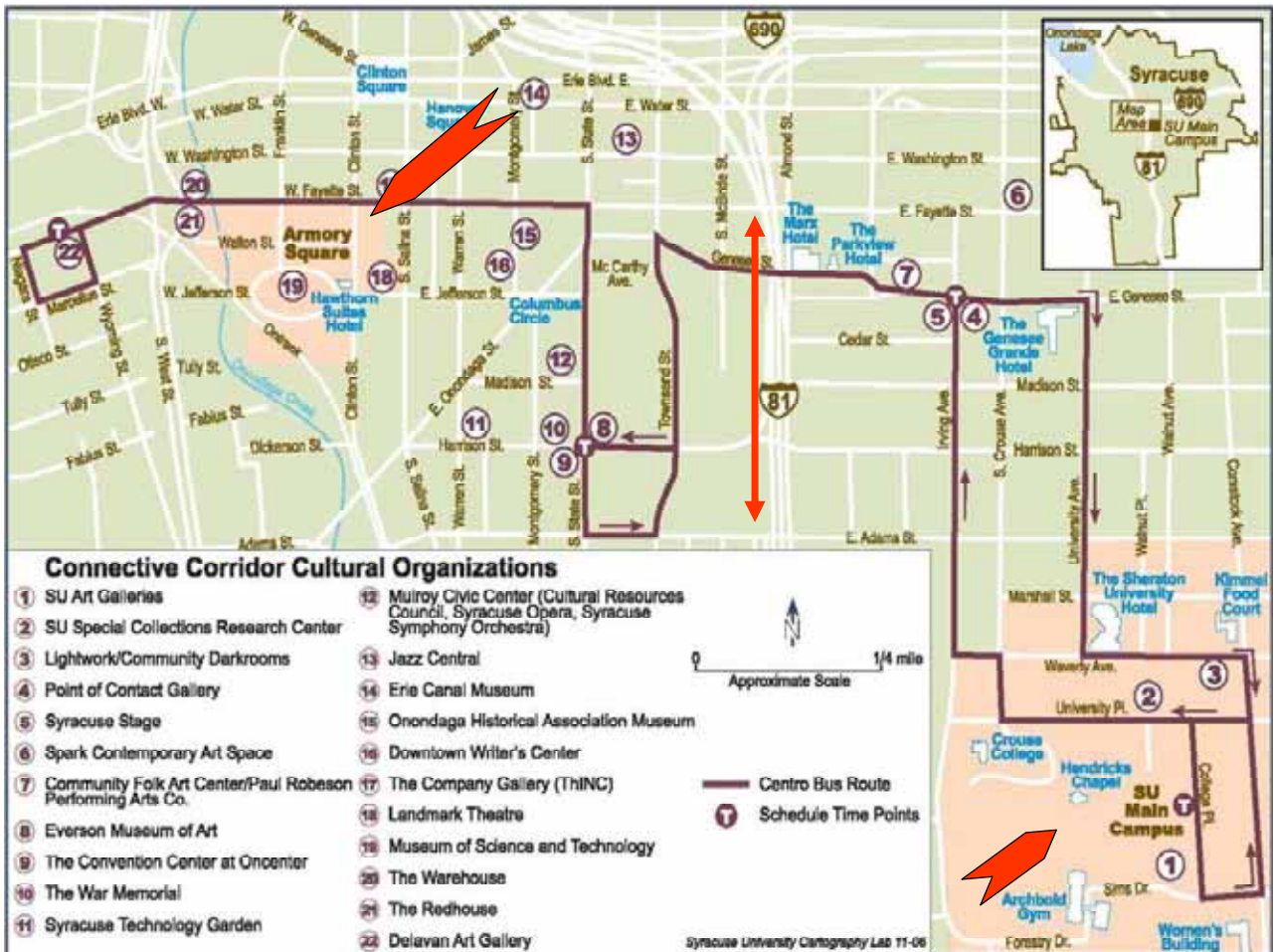
We envision an artist relocation program to get the word out that we have many old buildings with plenty of light, a low cost of living, lively neighborhoods, a sizeable community of artists, and beautiful surroundings. The Near West Side Initiative will include consultation on Green Building Technology from our Center of Excellence, design consultation from our Upstate Center, entrepreneurship training from our Falcone Center, and, most importantly, a package of financial, energy, and tax incentives demonstrating the investment in downtown revitalization from our diverse partners.

This initiative, in turn, becomes the first major sign of hope for an otherwise devastated neighborhood with a grand history and very resilient and talented residents – a hope that comes without displacement, as so many otherwise empty plots and dilapidated structures may now come to life on this new base of arts and entrepreneurship. This is a two-way street of beneficial development, and a very exciting arena for public scholarship in Syracuse.

And speaking of two-way streets, we are also involved in a very exciting public-private partnership with the City of Syracuse and several major corporate sponsors to

commission a Connective Corridor ---this one literally on a street---Genesee Street---that crosses all of New York State, east to west, and links our suburbs with our downtown.

In our case, the Connective Corridor will run from up on the University Hill, down Genesee Street, crossing under Route 81 – a physical and psychological barrier between the three campuses on the hill and the downtown inner city neighborhoods – and running all the way to the Warehouse and the entrance to the Near West Side neighborhood.



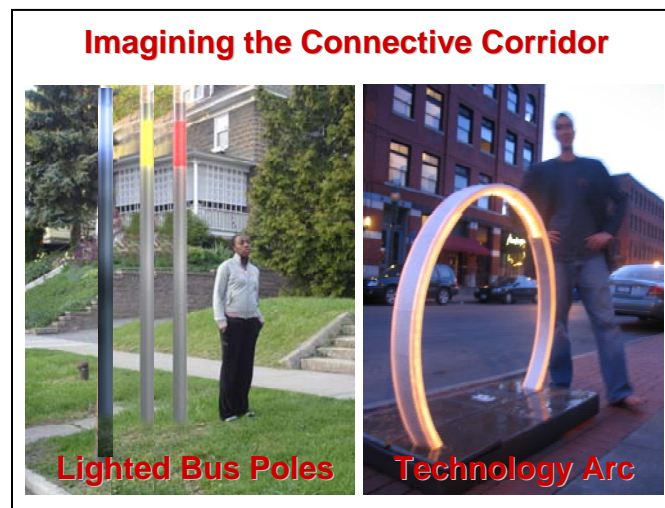
Connective Corridor

Most importantly, this will be a cultural corridor, connecting the campuses not only to the Warehouse and the nearby Armory Square historic district, but also showcasing along the way most of the city’s numerous cultural institutions---the local historical society, museums, concert halls, theaters, and galleries, including the Community Folk Art Center, a university-community partnership.

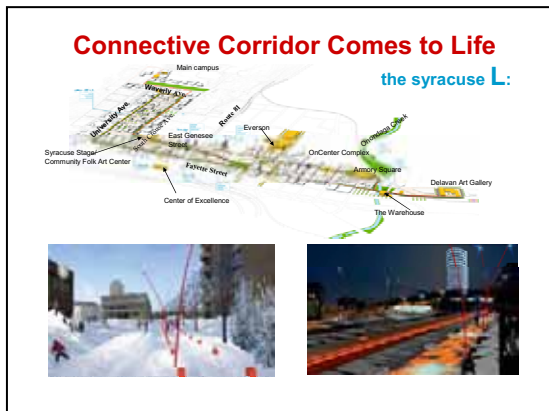


Community Folk Art Center

The Connective Corridor has been able to summon financial support from many, many organizations, both public and private, including National Grid and Time-Warner, as well as our entire Federal delegation, and has involved students, faculty, citizens, and business groups and arts organizations in its planning.



As part of an effort called “Imagining the Corridor,” classes from six of our colleges and our Renee Crown University Honors Program gathered information about the area and made suggestions for the design of the corridor. Architecture students mapped its neighborhoods. Marketing students asked neighbors what they wanted in the way of information and services that might be provided by kiosks along the way. Industrial Design students suggested designs for the kiosks and the interiors of Corridor shuttle buses. Information management and technology students researched what it would take, in terms of infrastructure, to offer Internet access there.



At the same time, we joined with the City and our corporate sponsors in mounting a professional design competition in which four national design teams reached a final competition stage and the winner, lead by Field Operations out of New York City, was recently announced, bringing the Syracuse L to life.

Along the Syracuse L will be urban reforestation, neighborhood redevelopment, a cultural corridor of substantial magnitude, pedestrian malls and winter recreation zones, and public art to remind us all of the magnificent history of Syracuse and the renewed vigor brought to us by our newest multi-cultural global community members.

The Syracuse L gives our university the opportunity for multi-partner, public scholarship projects, and we are in the process of commissioning our first three working groups of scholars, citizens, artists and experts of all sorts. The first projects will cover three vital aspects of the proposed Syracuse L: urban environmental sustainability, public memory and the arts, and disability studies and inclusion – three aspects that both the university and the community count as areas of strength and tradition.



And these three areas are also strongly shaping the university's partnership with the Syracuse City School District, the Partnership for Better Education, so that we can

keep that Syracuse tradition alive for generations to come. For example, our faculty has worked side-by-side with city school teachers to create a literacy-through-the arts program, with classes in the schools, on campus in our lectures, performance spaces, darkrooms and studios, as well as in the Warehouse. From this partnership is coming public scholarship in many media, including a soon-to-be-published book of living public memory, as seen through the eyes and words of our next generation. And, as this dynamic partnership moves up and down our hill, it embodies Scholarship in Action.

Making Public Scholarship Work for All

As we consider the value of projects of local public scholarship such as those embodied in our work in the arts, design and technology in Syracuse, we must recognize that this is hard work to do, requiring some new flexibility on the part of universities, cities, scholars, students, and citizens alike. In fact, just as American businesses are learning what it takes to succeed in a newly “flat world,” to be entrepreneurial, agile, collaborative, and diverse, so too must universities and their connected communities do the same.

The realities of local public scholarship are taxing and complicated, albeit very valuable to all involved. For universities, for example, there are the logistical details of supporting collaborative work performed largely outside the traditional laboratory or classroom. Which budget supports such work as it crosses from scholarship to teaching to engagement and mixes them all? Does the traditional university calendar fit this kind of work? How do we evaluate excellence in public scholarship – what are the “products” and who are the referees? Can we get comfortable with the sharing of “intellectual property” at the heart of the co-creation of public scholarship? Who gets the credit when discoveries are made in consortia spanning multiple institutions, firms, schools, and not-for-profits? Are we raising money to support the campus, the community, or both, in these “third spaces” of collaboration?

These, of course, are only some of the issues that quickly emerge as we all enter a new realm of local public scholarship in our new economy – a realm as complicated and as rewarding as the feat of building the Erie Canal. And there are numerous other complex challenges for many the diverse partners that enter this work with us. Neighborhood residents worry that we will use them as one-shot laboratories for purely “academic” experimentation. City officials fear losing a tax base if too many non-profit collaborations take off, and corporate partners watch closely to see if indeed there can be a double bottom line – one that is good for business and for community. Yes, there are many questions, but then there were many at the time of the Erie Canal too – a project that Thomas Jefferson called “nothing short of madness.” And while these diverse local projects may not immediately seem on par with that monumental revolution in American history, they certainly have gathered their fair share of both skeptics and enthusiasts.

At the least, it is clear that local public scholarship is taking off in many places, and in so doing it is fundamentally altering the relationship of universities and communities. As we open ourselves up and share intellectual, human, and social capital, and tackle the issues of our day in small but sustainable projects that accumulate to create considerable public trust, we are not only providing solutions for our future¹⁶ and citizen-leaders ready to build community, but we may well also be improving the academy – its work and its democratic culture – in the process. For our disciplines, scholars, and students, this kind of public scholarship may be a welcome though challenging respite from the competition for resources and credentials in a world full of zero-sum battles. As we instead join forces to tap the often untapped talent of our diverse communities, and to address our communal responsibilities, the academy gets refreshed with newly shared civic and intellectual purpose and new possibilities for excellence and imagination.

¹⁶ See the *Solutions for our Future* campaign of the American Council on Education at solutionsforourfuture.org.