

Intensifying Impact: Engagement Matters

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Expanding the Morrill Act Traditions for the 21st Century

Today we've shared stories of the civic learning, engagement, and high-impact practices underway at colleges and universities that are making a vigorous and critically important effort to preserve our democracy.² This "crucible moment" is a good time to recall another critical juncture in the history of our nation, 150 years ago, when the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 launched a revolution in higher education. Responding to President Lincoln, Congress made a monumental commitment to a new and deeply democratic vision of colleges and universities as sites of opportunity and engagement for all Americans. The "democracy colleges" that resulted have profoundly influenced our nation's character and prosperity.³

¹ Invited closing remarks given at the North Carolina Campus Compact Tenth Anniversary Civic Engagement Institute, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, February 15, 2012.

² National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (Jan. 2012).

³ Harry Boyte, American Commonwealth Project short description (25 Aug. 2011). ACP is a partnership launched by the White House Office of Public Engagement, the Department of Education, AACU and other higher education groups on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act in 1862. Also Nancy Cantor, "A New Morrill Act: Higher Education Anchors the 'Remaking of America,'" *The Presidency: The American Council on Education's Magazine for Higher Education Leaders* Fall 2009:16-22.



As Justin Smith Morrill, a man without a college education, told the legislature in his home state of Vermont, higher education should extend itself “not merely to those destined to sedentary professions,” as he put it, but more importantly to the majority of Americans who were working in agriculture, including many of those with the least education.⁴ At the time, 80 percent of our population was rural.

Today nearly 80 percent of our population lives in metropolitan areas,⁵ and higher education must again reach out to our nation’s majority in ways that nurture democracy. As the National Task Force commissioned by the Department of Education and led by AACU has urged so eloquently, this process must be “hands-on, face-to-face, active engagement in the midst of differing perspectives about how to address common problems that affect the well-being of our nation and the world.”⁶

All of us, privates and publics alike, must take part. Our times present tremendous challenges—from environmental degradation to failing schools to divided communities—issues that are felt most painfully by under-served and minority populations who are under-represented in higher education even as they comprise our fastest growing talent pool.

Education is the key. As Frederick Douglass advised back in Morrill’s day, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.”⁷ We can and must collaborate in our metropolitan areas with the energy and enthusiasm we once showed for the barn-raisings on our farms. We must act deliberately to create two-way streets of access and opportunity for the next generation of talent, building inclusion and diversity into the heart of our cultures, structures, and practices.

⁴ Martin C. Jischke, 2004 Justin Smith Morrill Lecture, “Adapting Justin Morrill’s Vision to a New Century: The Imperative of Change for Land-Grant Universities,” National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, San Diego, 14 Nov. 2004. Online at www.csrees.usda.gov/about/speeches/04_morrill.html Accessed 24 Jan 2012

⁵ Robert Weissbourd with Christopher Berry, “Cities and Economic Prosperity: A Data Scan on the Role of Cities in Regional and National Economies,” A Report for CEOs for Cities, 9 Apr. 2001: 4.

⁶ “Highlights,” *A Crucible Moment*.

⁷ Frederick Douglass, cited by Nicholas Kristof, “A Poverty Solution that Starts with a Hug,” *The New York Times* 8 Jan. 2012: SR11.

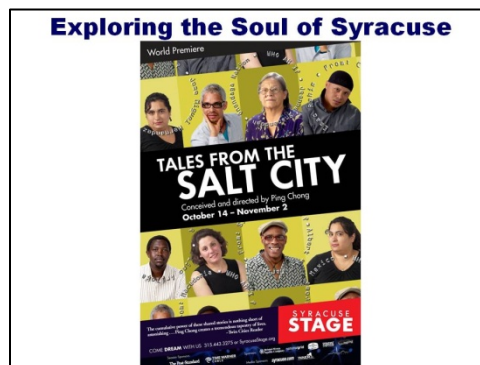
Scholarship in Action: The University as Anchor Institution

Colleges and universities can be superb anchor institutions. We can connect knowledge to action to produce social change while educating the next generation of civically-engaged talent. In Syracuse, we call this Scholarship in Action, and it is quickly transforming both our rust-belt city and the way many of us pursue our scholarship, leadership, teaching, learning and public problem-solving. It's been a win-win proposition for both the university and the community, and in my remaining time today, I'd like to give you a quick tour of some of this work, using some concrete examples to convey its catalytic value.

Social action has a proud history in both Syracuse and the university. The city was a way station on the Underground Railroad and the cockpit of the movement for women's suffrage and women's rights. The university reached out during World War II to invite Japanese American internees to study on our campus. After the war, when few private universities were willing to admit soldiers under the G.I. Bill, SU opened its doors to almost 10,000 veterans, tripling our enrollment overnight.

Once again, we're facing a call to action. Syracuse needs to galvanize its population—its diverse pool of talent—to remake its post-industrial future. SU wants be a big part of that future, but we have to act in collaboration, not domination. In a city with many voices, we've learned to listen.

In the 2004-2005 academic year, we began to engage in dialogues on campus and off to explore the city's history, stories, challenges and dreams and to see how they mapped onto our academic strengths. We called this "Exploring the Soul of Syracuse." In the years since then, it has been an ongoing conversation.



True dialogue must be deep, sustained, and systemic. As John Kuo Wei Tchen once told a conference of Imagining America, the national consortium of universities located at SU, authentic dialogue “must be a mutual meaning-making process that feeds the soul and clarifies choices we must make. It must be short-term, long-term, and medium term.”⁸

⁸ John Kuo Wei Tchen, “Homeland Insecurities: Teaching and the Intercultural Imagination,” *Foreseeable Futures #5, Position Papers from Imagining America: Arts and Scholars in Public Life*, originally given as the keynote address at the Imagining America Conference, Rutgers University, 2005.

In Syracuse, we began by talking about how we could help build civil infrastructure for the long haul. As a place-based anchor institution, we started with physical infrastructure that would create and help sustain a social infrastructure. Our own location was a challenge. We're situated on University Hill, so high above the city that the students call the space where two of our residence halls are located "Mount Olympus." Although we're only a 15-minute walk from downtown, we've been cut off for years by Interstate-81, an actual and a symbolic divide. We had to find some way to jump that highway, both physically and psychologically.



As a first step, we used world-class design to recapture the city's historic spirit of innovation in both practical and symbolic ways. On the other side of downtown, we renovated an old furniture warehouse and made it part of our campus. All at once, hundreds of students and their faculty were downtown every single day (and night!).

Running between the Warehouse and our main campus is a work in progress we've been calling the "Connective Corridor," a bus route, bike path, pedestrian walkway, arts district, and roadway with input on landscaping, lighting, design, and infrastructure from students, faculty, community residents, and partners that include the local utility company and officials from the city, state, and Federal governments.

The Corridor passes what was once the historic 15th Ward, a thriving African-American district that was bulldozed for the interstate and for urban renewal. As a sign of our commitment to reawakening the vibrant legacy of the 15th Ward, the Community Folk Art Center has been situated on the Corridor in a prominently located storefront. The Center was started by our African American Studies Department 40 years ago and has deep connections with the city's African American community. For the past two years, we've also collaborated with the families and descendants of those who once lived in the 15th Ward to remember them through photographs, stories, and music in a virtual history museum online.⁹

On a spot right near the Corridor, we and our partners also reclaimed the brownfield site of the old Smith Corona Typewriter factory and built the LEED-Platinum, New York State Center of Excellence in Environmental and Energy Systems. Twelve academic institutions are participants, along with firms that range in size from large corporations such as Carrier and Siemens to small, entrepreneurial start-ups in Central New York. Although the partners are geographically dispersed, it's important that the Center itself is embedded in the city, serving as

⁹<http://ourstories.syr.edu/>

a stake in the ground, so to speak, as well as a catalyst for new collaborations in sustainable neighborhoods and technology innovation.

As we've evolved in our role as an anchor institution and the perception has grown that everyone "wins" in the process, we've found that the impetus for a new project or partnership may come from anyone: from a dean, an external foundation, a group of residents, a long-standing faculty group with close community ties, or a New York State sponsored consortium. Their projects have one thing in common: namely, that they're firmly embedded in the city with joint university-community governance and/or engagement. As they grow, they create larger ecosystems for democratic engagement, serving as hubs for activities that often produce smaller scale projects and initiatives.

From Civil to Social Infrastructure: The Legacy of the Warehouse



The Warehouse has been ideal as such a hub. It anchors a section of downtown that is making a stunning comeback, and it's also next to one of the oldest but poorest neighborhoods in the city. The Warehouse has been a home for programs in art, technology, design, journalism, and architecture. All of them cross boundaries between academic disciplines, and all of them intertwine research, teaching, and public engagement.



Steve Klimek was a member of the first School of Architecture class to be in the Warehouse for a full year. He remembers seeing vacant storefronts in the area and thinking, "Why can't we do something with them?" As undergraduates, he and fellow student Nilus Klingel were galvanized into a series of projects that included a Pop-Up gallery to exhibit local

artists. They're now Engagement Fellows with Imagining America, and they themselves have renovated and opened a storefront downtown to use for what they describe as “an urban design center, a think tank, and a public space where people can get excited about architecture and urbanism.”

In Syracuse, collaborations in public scholarship have involved “experts” of all descriptions—real estate developers, local government officials and staffers, SU students, local non-profits, journalists, artists and art educators, school children and their teachers, grandmothers and their neighbors.

Leadership in these collaborations has come from the top-down and the ground up. From campus, they've included deans and the university's vice president for economic development. From the larger community, they've come from our local Gifford Foundation and, on a national level, from the Kauffman Foundation, which is sponsoring our wide-ranging initiative in entrepreneurship, and the Say Yes to Education Foundation, which is partnering with Syracuse in landmark urban education reform.

At the same time, teen-agers have also shown us the way. Public school students of all ages have participated in the ongoing Photography and Literacy Project created by SU faculty member Stephen Mahan and the SU students enrolled in his classes. The school district students' photographic and narrative self-portraits are regularly on display at the Warehouse, and they've given the university and the community new eyes for each other and the sense that the space they occupy is jointly “owned,” creating a new social infrastructure that paves the way for coalition-building.



This year, for the photography exhibit “The World Thinks My Name is Sad,” teens and adults from the neighborhood organization P.E.A.C.E. Inc. worked with an SU transmedia class to create poetry and photography. The project was about possibilities, or as John Colasacco, an instructor in SU's writing center, wrote afterwards, “not to give the world more professional photographers and more professional writers, but to show that writing and photography are two small ways that the world is given to us.”

PEACE, Inc. which stands for People's Equal Action and Community Effort, is situated in the Near Westside, a neighborhood just across the street from the Warehouse. Unfortunately, that street is eight lanes wide and often choked with traffic. When the Warehouse opened its

doors, the Near Westside was nearly hidden from view by an array of ugly railroad trestles and empty warehouses that residents used to call the “Berlin Wall.” Today this old industrial neighborhood presents a multitude of challenges and opportunities. Half of its 3,300 residents live below the poverty level, 40 percent are unemployed, and 17 percent consider themselves to have one or more disabilities. Home ownership has shrunk to 15 percent.

Six years ago, a group of residents of this community joined with us and with foundations, businesses, not-for-profits, state and city government, and other institutions of higher education to create a non-profit organization, the Near Westside Initiative, to write and rewrite the story and the future of their community. We called it the SALT District, for Syracuse Art, Literacy, and Technology, the foundations on which we hoped to build a vibrant legacy, just as prior generations had built one around the salt industry.



This exciting and deeply democratic partnership has required paying attention to the social as well as the physical infrastructure of the neighborhood, engaging both the home-grown next generation and attracting to the neighborhood artists, entrepreneurs, and innovators for the future.

Marilyn Higgins, a former utility company executive who is now vice president of SU’s Community Engagement and Economic Development Office, as well as president of the Initiative’s board of directors, has told me over the years that the collaborative model is “really challenging. It’s hard,” she says. “This hasn’t been done this way before.” But we’ve found that it’s the only way to go.

Greening the Salt District

From the beginning, the Near Westside Initiative has embedded art, technology and literacy with other fields—architecture, design, entrepreneurship, law, education, environmental engineering, public health and public communications, to name a few—as catalysts for innovation and transformation, generating more than \$50 million worth of public and private development. More than 60 artists already live and work in loft spaces and studios on the Near Westside.

A major goal here is sustainability. Ed Bogucz, director of the Center of Excellence and an environmental engineer, developed a passion for the Near Westside Initiative because he

regards re-vitalization of the community—and others like it—as a “grand challenge.” As he once observed: “If you look at the sustainability of the neighborhood—its environmental sustainability, the economics, the social justice issues—I think it’s fair to say that this neighborhood and many other neighborhoods in cities across the country were essentially thrown away. And humanity simply can’t throw away neighborhoods and hope to survive on the planet.”¹⁰

The U.S. Green Building Council has designated the Near Westside as the nation’s first LEED Neighborhood Development Project. SU Architecture’s UPSTATE Center joined with the Center of Excellence to conduct an international competition called “From the Ground Up” to design three cutting-edge, green, single-family homes on specific sites in the neighborhood. The winners were some of the nation’s leading architects. We now have 11 green homes, and our architecture students have helped build some of them. Their symbolic value alone has been immense. The giant crane that lowered the modules into place on one house was the first to be seen in decades and a huge “stake in the ground,” as far as residents were concerned.



The sites for the green homes were among dozens of vacant or distressed properties purchased from slum or absentee landlords by a founding partner in the Near Westside Initiative, the non-profit organization HomeHeadquarters. It plans to replace or renovate homes—selling some of them for \$1 to buyers who commit to restoring them. The goal is to re-house—not to remove—existing residents.

This is civic engagement on a huge scale, driven by community partners, faculty, and staff who create a large ecosystem that enables students to engage with residents of the community in cutting-edge public scholarship.

Marion Wilson, a sculptor and director of community initiatives in the visual arts in our School of Education, has taught a continuing series of studio classes in “social sculpture,” named after the concept put forward by Josef Beuys that sculpture is not only object making, but can also be thought, experience, and how we mold and shape the world.

Over several semesters, in close collaboration with community members, Wilson and her students have completely transformed 601 Tully, an abandoned house across the street from an

¹⁰ Conversation on 8 Jan. 2010.

elementary school. It has become a multi-purpose community incubator for the arts, humanities, and entrepreneurship, complete with its own bookshop and community garden.



If you'd visited the inaugural gallery exhibition there last October, you could have seen crowds of elementary students watching a Monarch butterfly emerge from its chrysalis—one of many glued into an indoor garden—in a multi-faceted exhibit recalling the Butterfly Effect—in which a small thing, a butterfly flapping its wings in Mexico, ultimately triggers a series of events that result in a thunderstorm in Kansas. It's an allusion to “the delicate, endlessly responsive, ultimately unquantifiable interrelationships between seemingly unrelated people, places and things,” as Wilson and her students have written, adding that “601 Tully is simultaneously an idea, a fixed location, a curriculum, a dialogue and a repository of collective experience and new culture.”

On a smaller, much faster scale, students and faculty in our iSchool and the College of Visual and Performing Arts collaborated with neighborhood residents and the Near Westside Initiative to create a Little Free Library, inspired by similar libraries built in Wisconsin. The project took nine months, start to finish. The library, which is the size of a pay phone kiosk, invites passers-by to “take a book, leave a book.” It's a flourishing example of ongoing democratic engagement.

Two-Way Avenues of Full Participation

Whether large or small, these partnerships are critical for building the two-way avenues of full participation that higher education must create. They demonstrate on a daily basis that diversity and excellence are intertwined—not opposed. If we want to build pathways for recruitment to higher education—and to our cities—we have to knock down our invisible walls and build geographies of opportunity for students and their families long before it's time for them to apply to college.

In Syracuse, we're creating a very large ecosystem of collaboration through Say Yes to Education. It's a partnership between SU, the Syracuse City School District, the Say Yes to Education Foundation, the Syracuse Teachers' Association, and numerous other organizations to provide vital support and rich opportunities to all 21,000 students in the District and their families. These include free after-school programs and summer camps, school-based physical and mental health clinics, academic and family counseling, legal aid, tutoring, and college

advising every step of the way. Students who attend the 10th, 11th, and 12th grades and graduate from a public high school in the City are eligible for free tuition at more than 100 Say Yes compact colleges in the state of New York. So far, 60 different colleges have accepted some 1,000 Say Yes students, including the 127 now enrolled at SU.



It's early in this effort, but we're encouraged by some of the signs we're seeing in the public schools in Syracuse. Since 2009, graduation rates have increased nearly 5 percent, and the percent of students attending college has increased nearly 20 percent. In 2011, the city schools experienced an increase of enrollment for the first time in 10 years with 320 new students. In just over a one-year period, 9th grade students passing Regents algebra increased 31 percent, and the number of 9th grade students who dropped out or were inactive declined 44 percent.

We're also partnering with our neighbors from the Onondaga Nation, and indeed with all six sovereign Haudenosaunee Nations. Our Haudenosaunee Promise scholarship program guarantees full financial support up front for any citizen of the six Nations, so children and families can form the expectation of going to college early on. Among the 125 students who identify themselves as indigenous, we now have 63 Haudenosaunee Promise students. Although their numbers are small, their presence is immensely valuable, not the least for the traditions and perspectives they add to our multi-faceted community on campus and off.

Last year on Columbus Day, Corinne Abrams, a Haudenosaunee Promise scholar, introduced herself in a letter to the student newspaper as "Yawendehawi from the Tuscarora Nation, turtle clan." "My name means 'she brings in the morning,'" she wrote. "Many people here in classes tell me when they meet me that they've never met a Native American person before in their life. Fortunately, at this university I have been able to say, 'Turn around, that guy sitting on the other side of the class is from the same reservation as me.'"

As we reach out to a much broader population of students (and faculty), including those willing to come from Atlanta, Miami, or LA to join us in the snow belt, it turns out that our expansive work in our own multi-cultural, multi-lingual city plays a key role in making sure that our talented recruits succeed once they arrive. As John Saltmarsh and other scholars have noted,

opportunities to feel connected to and engaged with under-served communities are predictors of both student and faculty retention, and that's just what we're seeing.¹¹

In architecture, a field that has not traditionally been inclusive, our dean reports a substantial increase in students of color. He attributes this to intense recruitment in metropolitan areas with diverse populations and to the attraction of being able to engage at Syracuse in architecture studios like those on the Near Westside. And, the same can be said for faculty who now come to SU at least in part for its commitment to publicly-engaged scholarship. For example, the dean of education reports that Say Yes and related programs have been significant factors in recruiting and retaining faculty of color.¹²



Whether it's sustainable architecture or inclusive education, public scholarship gives both students and faculty chances to maintain ties to communities and projects that validate their place and centrality in the university.¹³ And there is real room for them to thrive and to be a part of rebuilding Syracuse. The headquarters of Say Yes, for example, now occupies the upstairs in one of two large renovated warehouses that were once part of the "Berlin Wall" on West Street. Downstairs is La Casita, created by SU faculty members and La Liga, the Spanish Action League of Onondaga County, to serve as an intellectual and artistic bridge between communities and generations. Just down West Street, a second warehouse, the Case Supply Building, will house two large organizations that speak directly to the challenge and promise of tapping into the vast pool of talent in neighborhoods such as the Near Westside. One is the world's largest literacy organization, ProLiteracy International, and the other is WCNY, the region's public television affiliate.

In fact, tapping into "home grown" talent through engagements around literacy, the arts, and public communication is a natural for both Syracuse and SU. Six years ago, for example, Steve Davis, the chair of newspaper and online journalism, didn't know anyone on the South Side of Syracuse, but he got his students involved there after a meeting with residents who were unhappy about the way the community was portrayed in the primary local media. Davis, who

¹¹ Susan Sturm, Tim Eatman, John Saltmarsh, and Adam Bush, "Full Participation: Building the Architecture for Diversity and Community Engagement in Higher Education (Sept. 2011), a Catalyst Paper available online at <http://fullparticipation.net/> Accessed 30 Jan. 2012. Among architecture students, 30 percent are students of color, with 16 percent Latino and African American.

¹² Faculty of color make up 59 percent of the assistant professors in education.

¹³ George Sanchez, "Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy," The John Dewey Lecture, University of Michigan, Oct. 2004.

now counts any number of South Siders as friends, assigned his students to look for the stories no one else was telling. It was a process that required the students to truly *see* the community and those who live and work there. Over the years, they have produced a successful monthly newspaper, *The Stand*, in collaboration with writers from the community. They're now creating a full-color magazine that will be home delivered just before the Presidential election in the Near Westside.

Place-Based Collaboration – Democracy in Action



Place-based collaborations enable great civic learning, empower communities, and provide fertile ground for public scholarship. They're dynamic. As trust and reciprocity grow, so do the ideas and possibilities for addressing critical social issues, big and small. In Syracuse these collaborations generate new ones. We see this almost every day. For example, our work on the South Side and the Near Westside recently positioned us for landmark collaborations through New York State's Regional Economic Development Council to tackle serious health issues in these communities: obesity, diabetes, and infant mortality.

On the South Side, which has no supermarket and is, in fact, a "food desert," infant mortality has been high, and poor nutrition is a leading cause.¹⁴ The University is joining the South Side Community Coalition to construct a 3500 square foot urban food cooperative to provide fresh and healthy food from local and regional farmers and distributors. The co-op is the first new business structure on the South Side in 30 years, and it will be owned and run by the Coalition.

The SU partners again come from a broad range of disciplines and organizations: law, business, architecture, entrepreneurship at the South Side Innovation Center, and the Lerner Center for Public Health Promotion at the Maxwell School. Community partners and funders include the City of Syracuse, the utility company National Grid, the Gifford Foundation, and the Community Foundation of Central New York.

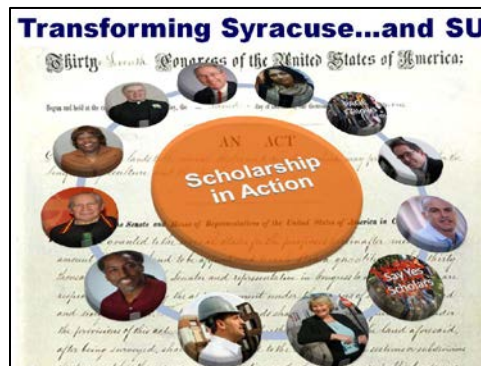
A similar project, still on the drawing boards, would address needs for better nutrition and health in the Near Westside. The SALT District Neighborhood Food and Health Center will bring together wellness and community development in a new complex designed specifically for

¹⁴ Sandra D. Lane, *Why Are Our Babies Dying? Pregnancy, Birth, and Death in America* (Boulder, London: Paradigm Publishers, 2008).

this use, with nutritional counseling, cooking classes, access to healthy food, and preventative health services.

It's a partnership between Nojaim Brothers Supermarket, a family firm in the neighborhood for 90 years, Saint Joseph's Hospital, Syracuse University's School of Architecture, Falk College of Sports and Human Dynamics, and the Lerner Center at the Maxwell School. They'll renovate the supermarket and create a greenhouse and a teaching kitchen to connect to a new West Side Clinic run by St. Joseph's. Paul Nojaim, vice chairman of the Near Westside Initiative board and proprietor of the supermarket, is a major player in this process.

It's a very ambitious project, but then ambition is now commonplace in this part of our city. No one has illusions that success will come easily or fast, but all kinds of people now believe that things can happen if we all raise that barn together.



As we raise that barn together, it is clear that the participants in Scholarship in Action in Syracuse are changing the face of the University as much as they are contributing to transformations in our city. And this process of transformation is apparent on all of the campuses embracing the engaged work that we have heard about today.

Going forward, we can also expect that the publicly-engaged scholarship, learning, and collaboration we have started will necessitate some examination of long-standing traditions and practices on our own campuses. And this will not always be easy, as universities have a fierce ethos of self-determination. Too often, we've been ivory towers, not comfortable with democratic, collaborative work—where the tables can be turned on who is an expert and who is not. But the truth is that we need experts from across the disciplines and across our communities if we are to address the critical issues of our times. As Bob Berdahl, now the interim President of the University of Oregon, once remarked, “Few problems, few issues, and few discoveries are any longer, if they ever were, the province of a single discipline. Amidst greater specialization must also come greater reintegration.”¹⁵ As we've heard all day, this can and is being done.

But even as we talk about the value of public scholarship and civic learning, we often act cautiously in thinking of real institutional transformation to embrace it. It's hard to cross

¹⁵ Robert M. Berdahl speaking at his inauguration as Chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, 24 April 1998.

disciplinary silos, and our budget models and curricular organizations often inhibit it. Sometimes our disciplinary networks don't validate the work, and this becomes especially tricky around tenure and promotion time.

Nonetheless, this truly is a “crucible moment,” as Caryn McTighe Musil and her colleagues have reminded us so powerfully.¹⁶ To fulfill our mission as a public good, institutions of higher education must change as radically as they did in the days of Abraham Lincoln and Justin Morrill. It begins, as it has in Syracuse, with listening and thinking deeply about the places in which we are embedded. Civic engagement is vital for our faculty members, our students, our communities, for the nation, and for the world. It will strengthen our democracy, the only one we have, and we have no time to waste.

¹⁶ *A Crucible Moment.*