

## “What (Public) Good Are the (Engaged) Humanities?”

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**Abstract:** In response to *Imagining America’s Curriculum Project Report*, this essay reflects on common achievements, problems, and opportunities among efforts to link campuses and communities to advance cultural development and social justice. Connecting humanities research and teaching with projects to further democracy, social justice, and the public good can take advantage of the latest episodes of fiscal crisis, technology innovation, and mission drift, and even argue that “public scholarship” represents a strong direction for revival.

Opening the dialogue on public scholarship raises questions about how we define the public, who belongs to it, and how digital media may be creating new publics. Such questions link back to the very origins of the “liberal arts” and run through the latest debates over critical theory, race, class, nationality, and gender in higher education. Engaged scholarship and project-based community collaborations can both reach such overlooked or new publics and become a means for assessing the value and impact of engagement. The essay discusses a number of examples of academic centers, programs, and courses that link the humanities to public engagement.

Engagement has been powerfully instantiated on a number of campuses through service learning programs. While the term “service” unfortunately plays into the biases of an old missionary-like paradigm, many of the projects do not, arising out of collaborative knowledge or art-making enterprises in which community partners hold positions of leadership, and even do some or much of the teaching. The service learning movement can be, I argue, a strong ally in advancing the vision of engagement contained in the *Curriculum Project Report*, and vice versa. But this will require that we continue to debate and refine the aims, underlying values, and institutional politics of engaged and public scholarship.

Whether in the humanities, arts, or architecture and design, engagement runs into many of the same issues, and these are pinpointed in the essay’s “Ten Key Points for Reflection.” In sum, (1) the political economy of higher education is such that engagement needs to be structured into the curriculum, not marginalized as “outreach”; (2) tenure and promotion criteria will have to be revisited and revised, with an insistence that engagement and publicly-oriented humanities or art work are forms of research and of the production of knowledge; (3) disciplines need to recognize the importance of “going local” in academic research; (4) successful community engagement requires critical reflection by faculty and students on diversity, multiculturalism, and their own identities; (5) projects should proceed by mapping community assets, not by assuming “deficits” in need of fixes; (6) sustainability means turning projects into partnerships and (7) institutionalizing engaged courses; (8) engagement in the curriculum means altering course goals, learning outcomes, and assessment strategies; (9) partnership projects mean new and different work-loads for everyone; and (10) engagement can help campuses build bridges to underrepresented groups and neighborhoods and so help diversify the academy and increase educational opportunities for students of color.