From the Director
Tenure: A Public Matter
Julie Ellison

For a long time, I refused to write about tenure in this column because I thought that it would bore—and alienate readers who are not faculty members themselves. Tenure, I thought, would seem like an academic guild ritual irrelevant to the wider community of public scholars and culture workers. But I am going to write about it now, using the word, tenure, as a synonym for the broader terms, "tenure and promotion" or "the reward system" for university faculty.

As part of a broad national discussion about public scholarship—what it is, what difference it makes, and how it flourishes—I have decided that tenure is a public matter. The tenure issue is bound up with Imagining America’s key task: furthering public scholarship that is rooted in the link between culture and citizenship. This task involves defining what public scholarship is and establishing the specific character of its excellence.

I believe that there are four reasons why Imagining America should devote some of its resources to addressing tenure as a public matter:

• Existing tenure policies in the humanities and arts can impede the flow of knowledge between campuses and communities. The flow of ideas will become richer and smarter once these discouragements are removed.

• Campus-community projects aren’t as good as they could be. Their processes and products need to be reflected on and debated. We should be asking, what are the measures of excellence for cultural work by individuals, groups, programs? This kind of critical reflection is itself a form of public scholarship.

• Public scholarship can strengthen alliances between universities and other knowledge-making institutions. Much of what universities do is directly tied to the work of other public cultural institutions, including schools, museums, libraries, theaters, and public radio and television. Policies that encourage public scholarship can make these alliances more deliberate and useful.

• Many faculty experience a frustrating clash between their intellectual goals, which include pursuing community-based scholarship, and institutional tenure policies. Figuring out how public scholarship counts is an important step in building a diverse faculty in colleges and universities.

At Imagining America’s national conference in Fall 2003, Kristina Valaitis, Executive Director of the Illinois Humanities Council, lauded faculty scholars involved in public humanities projects and called on universities to “Reward these faculty! Give them tenure!” In the worst-case scenario, Valaitis said, such faculty are “penalized within the university for their efforts.” She urged, “Work that bridges the academy and the community should count toward tenure and promotion.”

The current system extracts a high price both from communities, because they aren’t getting access to publicly-engaged faculty, and from scholars who feel that they can’t practice the kind of scholarship they want to pursue. If we can adapt the tenure process to include public scholarship in the cultural dimension, then it’s possible to benefit both groups. We need changes that are flexible and credible.

In response to urgings from our whole national network, Imagining America is forming a tenure team. This will be a group of faculty scholars and artists, presidents and provosts, and experienced professionals in community-based organizations and public cultural institutions. The team—to be announced in September 2004—will produce a report grounded in a broad, coherent vision of public scholarship in the humanities, arts, and design. We hope that the report will be a useful tool for faculty, chairs, and deans in the cultural disciplines.

The Center for the Study of Public Scholarship at Emory University describes public scholarship as "collaborative scholarship that connects knowledge produced inside and outside of academic institutions.” In this spirit, Imagining America’s tenure team will focus squarely on creativity, discovery, and research—the making of new knowledge, new understanding, and new cultural forms.
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Tenure policies in higher education are continuously adapting to change. They have adapted continuously to new realities, such as growing numbers of practicing artists with faculty appointments, research in fields like women’s studies where new feminist methodologies challenged academic norms, and the trend towards more edgy and personal kinds of academic writing, such as the memoir. Public scholarship is another challenge that is being met differently at different kinds of institutions. Because Imagining America serves such a diverse array of colleges and universities, each with different priorities, we are not going to advocate for a single approach to tenure.

Imagining America is not going to reinvent the wheel. Rather, the team will adapt or translate good policies that already exist so that they better fit the cultural disciplines. Thus the portfolio model used in architecture and urban planning programs could be shaped to accommodate some forms of public scholarship in the humanities. The team will propose new approaches only where there is no good current model. For example, there is no policy that values integration and complexity as specific kinds of excellence. The tenure team therefore might propose a way to evaluate the integration, within a single complex project, of all three of the university’s missions—teaching, research, and public engagement.

Many efforts to rethink the grounds of tenure and promotion are already underway in higher education. These include Boyer’s work on the “scholarship of engagement” and its important sequels, nurtured by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching; Preparing Future Faculty, initiated by the Council of Graduate Schools and the American Association of Colleges and Universities; the “Faculty Roles and Rewards” program of the American Association for Higher Education; and the East/West Clearinghouses for the Scholarship of Engagement.

If we take public scholarship seriously, then we need to frame broader and more flexible definitions of scholarship, research, and creative work. We need to think adventurously about what we are willing to define as knowledge, who we consider to be engaged in research, what we regard as interesting, and how learning, research, teaching, debate, and action are coming together in complex projects that, crucially, require new measures of excellent complexity.

SLAP Branches Out

What happens when an initiative takes off beyond the wildest dreams of its creator? That’s what S.K. Woodall, artist and adjunct professor at Carnegie Mellon University, is about to find out. His Sustainable Landscape and Architecture Project, otherwise known as SLAP, has grown roots that reach from its original seeds in Pittsburgh to Atlanta, Georgia, and Birmingham, Alabama, growing from a local partnership into a cross-regional initiative, and one that could soon take on national proportions.

SLAP, an Imagining America “best practice,” is a community-based, after-school arts education initiative, founded in 1995. Since then, over 300 students, primarily African-American and economically disadvantaged youth from inner-city Pittsburgh, have completed the program. To create a base of theoretical knowledge, SLAP leads off with mini-courses and studio experiences with CMU faculty and professional guests from the community. Then the students go on neighborhood tours and field trips to places ranging from construction sites to Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater. With their new knowledge and experiences, the students head to Pittsburgh’s Hill District, a once-depressed area whose vacant lots and brownfields nonetheless offer a promising canvas for renewal. In teams and individually, the students conceive of restoration ideas and draft preliminary designs and proposals. Then come presentations and external critiques, with the program culminating in the execution of an integrated site restoration plan.

These projects teach students practical job skills and nurture budding interests in areas that play very minor roles in the public schools: creative design applications, technical drawing, design applications of virtual reality, model-making, robotics, site analysis methods, and landscape design and horticulture.