Meeting Minutes for Planning Theme 5: “Incorporate Service and Community Engagement”
Wednesday, March 29, 2017

This meeting consisted of two parts. In the first part, Beth Torres, Grants Officer with the Office for Sponsored Programs, guided a discussion on the current status of the NEH and how project members could advocate for its survival. In the second part, guest speaker Dr. Matthew Frye Jacobson, William Robertson Coe Professor of American Studies and History and founder of the Public Humanities Institute at Yale University, presented to the group about the creation of the Public Humanities initiative at Yale and directions for public scholarship.

Part I: The Future of the NEH

Overview from Beth Torres:
- The NEH’s funding only accounts for 0.06% of the federal budget.
- It has some Republican support.
- It’s not just focused on the institutions for the humanities; it also supports a lot of small businesses and other institutions around these.
- The federal fiscal year ends in April, and there could be a possible government shutdown because of disagreements about the budget.
- To advocate for the NEH, it’s better to call one's representative than to email or write a letter.

Lisa Lancia: How can we advocate – is it better to do this as individuals, or as an institution?
Eva Badowska: It fits with Fordham’s Jesuit mission to support the NEH.
Laura Morreale: So what can we do come April 28 [when the fiscal year ends] to show that humanities research matters?
Beth Torres: Some Republicans are arguing that the amount of money allotted to the NEH is so small that we should be able to find the money to support humanities initiatives elsewhere – but it’s very difficult to get grants anywhere.
Matthew McGowan: How do we articulate what we do to the public at large to highlight its relevance and necessity?
LM: We seem to be taking the stance that the university is powerless, but this is not true.
Lisa Holsberg: We should focus on symbolic capital: the NEH is powerful because it exists. It gives a stamp of approval so that private entities are encouraged to become involved. It’s important to have this public mission for the humanities in the federal government.
Matthew Jacobson: Is this a society that values knowledge? It’s a principle that has to be fought for.
BT: The National Humanities Alliance held a Humanities Advocacy Day on March 13th, so this has gone to Congress.
David Hamlin: The NEH is not the only thing that’s threatened – financial aid for students (Pell Grants) are also on the chopping block. How can this work with/against the fight for the NEH? Do Pell Grants have more value than the NEH?
BT: The NEH has wide value. When you apply for a grant from the NEH, you often have to consider how your project relates to the common good; for example, the NEH does programs for veterans in communities.
Samantha Sabalis: Could we coordinate a statement on behalf of our project, looking at any examples created by the other 27 schools that received an NEH Next Generation Ph.D. Planning Grant?
EB: I will reach out to the Council of Graduate Schools, who coordinates the twenty-eight schools who received the grants.

**Part II: Matthew Jacobson on the Public Humanities at Yale University**

Will narrate his own experience with the Public Humanities program since its inception ten years ago. It has lots of dimensions – civic, curricular, responsible mentoring…

The start of the Public Humanities initiative at Yale feels like a conspiracy—
- It emerged out of student agitation, with students wanting to change the terrain in American Studies.
- One student had worked with a public humanities program at Brown University, while another had worked in radio and wanted to incorporate something similar at Yale.
- They started thinking about what a public humanities program would look like, and made a proposal to Matthew Jacobson, who was then the Chair of American Studies.
- Steven Lubar from the Smithsonian came to consult with them.
- Focused on what they already had – found that students and faculty had already done several projects in the public humanities, such as civic projects, documentary filmmaking, outreach programs.
- Got thirty people interested in working with the initiative and adapting their courses, bringing the public humanities skills they already had into their teaching.

Funding model:
- Built a record of accomplishment and then incorporated this into small funding requests for modest amounts -- $10,000 or $20,000 at a time.
- Now the Initiative receives approximately $35,000 a year.
- No new faculty hired; focus on using existing resources.
After collecting these resources, the founders started to think about what this would look like as a program – a sort of “certificate,” first only for American Studies students but now including students from many other departments. They studied other programs to figure out what the program should look like, and came up with their structure:

- Four courses:
  - Introduction to the Public Humanities – readings on museum and documentary studies, analysis of what a public consists of. Ends with a collective project.
  - Methods seminar: Can take a class in oral histories, digital humanities, and documentary studies…whatever fits into the student’s goals. Can also be an independent study.
  - Practicum/internship: The students choose their own, with oral history projects, museum, film-makers…
  - A scholarly paper or exhibit, e.g. a project on Japanese-American internment, an exhibition on the centenary of WWI focused on diversity and patriotism.

Surprisingly, found that not many students were interested in receiving the certificate; some interested but couldn’t devote that many courses to receiving it. Students tend to do projects and do one or two classes rather than taking the full certification.

Mission: to put university knowledge out to a public audience but also to bring non-academics into the conversation.

All scholarly work is creative, but we don’t acknowledge how creative our work actually is. Public humanities work encourages this creativity but also emphasizes collaboration. There’s a siloing of different departments and institutions – the Public Humanities Initiative needed to create a rolodex to bring museums at Yale into academic conversations.

- Found that the different museums didn’t really communicate with each other, either.
- Called a meeting of all museum personnel – forty people came, partially because they were suspicious and afraid that other departments would try to “own” museum studies. Instead, the Public Humanities Initiative wanted to create a portal to them.
- Also forged connections to art, drama, and music schools at Yale from School of Arts and Sciences.
- Created connections to major and small historical societies, local theatres, public libraries – forming a network to partner with.
- Trying to serve many different constituencies and place students.

Yale as the founder of the Northeastern Public Humanities Consortium. Lots of public humanities programs that get together twice a year and hold an annual symposium. The level of student ambition and achievements was incredible – e.g. a project on New Haven’s food trucks that created oral histories of their owners and mapped the owners’ perspectives of the city.
Sections of the Initiative:

- History and the Public – careful to separate it from Public History, making it more dynamic. Not just speaking to the community, but also for it.
- Space and Place – focusing on New Haven. Walking tours, mapping, bringing local relevance into the study of the humanities.
- Arts Research – archival artistic work in art, drama, music…
- Digital Humanities – partnering with the existing Digital Humanities lab at the Yale University Library.
- Museums and Collections
- Documentary Studies

Impact of the Public Humanities Initiative on the intellectual life of the university:

- On Jacobson himself: started working on historical work in a different register. Created the Crossroads of Hope and Despair, which combines photographs and interviews. Now works on documentaries as well.
- Laura Wexler (co-founder): created her own project after working with Public Humanities students that tracks FSA (Farm Security Administration) photographs in the 1930s by photographer and location, using digital tools. The Public Humanities Initiative showed her new ways to be a historian of photography.

Q&A Session:

Matthew McGowan: It’s interesting that very few students opt for the certificate. I’m struck by the curriculum created specifically for Master’s students going on to the Ph.D. Could you talk more about this?
MJ: The four course requirement is too much for many students. They also fear the certificate will mark them as not going into the academy, and feel that it looks like they’re giving up on the academic track. This is especially true of students in African-American Studies, where the Public Humanities feels like a luxury – they don’t feel they can risk this experimental project. We’re considering the ramifications for the doctorate, possibly adding a Public Humanities dimension to the dissertation. We thought that the Public Humanities concentration in the Master’s program would be popular, and were surprised when it wasn’t.
Erin McKenna: For the internship portion, does Yale provide students with funding?
MJ: Now there is summer money available for students, but they can also do an internship during the semester. We also support students by enrolling them in a class while they’re on their internship.
EM: I noticed in the readings for today that public humanities projects disadvantage young faculty, especially faculty members of color. So is there another avenue for this program, for alt-ac jobs?
MJ: Yale’s dean seems to want to prioritize the non-ac track, but it’s not the only option. It sometimes leads to Public Humanities university faculty positions for graduates.  
Eva Badowska: We’re building relationships with Fordham’s press and radio station, but also with community organizations like the Bartow-Pell Mansion and Museum. How do you build these connections – what do you offer university and community partners?  
MJ: One example is how we’re creating “incubator” courses that are based on a theme coming up at the Smithsonian. On a local level, it comes down to relationships between people. There’s an emphasis on serving all the parties involved.  
Lisa Holsberg: How do you encourage community involvement/a shared voice?  
MJ: One way is by holding events off-campus. Eg. an event held at a local church green actually evolved to be all in Spanish by the end, taken over by community voices.  
LH: Do you have ways to describe the value of this shift to community voices for Yale administrators?  
MJ: We focus on the collective spirit changing, so dramatic in this instance because it involved a change in language. The shift to Spanish gave permission for a whole section of the community to step in who had been relying on translators before. It became a more important discussion than the one that was planned. Other people in the room are never going to forget that you’re from Yale, which can be both a good and a bad thing.  
Samantha Sabalis: In terms of community, what happens to projects when students leave/graduate?  
MJ: We put that in the category of responsibility – make sure that the end game is clear for all involved. We try to make sure it doesn’t come down to a single individual, so the project can carry on once each student leaves.  
David Hamlin: The program was build out of the American Studies program, and it seems biased towards American humanities/culture – is it possible to go beyond this?  
MJ: It shouldn’t be limited to Americanists; we also have to consider how it reaches out to global interests. Institutionally, the program would have to change, draw on other departments and faculty. We could think more in terms of the skill set rather than the content, but it could drain the initiative of important energy. We could also redefine the local – for instance, a digital mapping project that tracked materials, labour, and capital flows for construction at Yale, which was both local and global.  
Laura Morreale: As you’ve laid groundwork with a focus on New Haven, you could bring other material to your platforms in the community, such as medieval subjects.  
MJ: The focus on knowledge for its own sake ties in with the value of knowledge. Creates a shift away from the idea of the university as utilitarian, just a credential.  
EB: Building on David Hamlin’s question about bias towards American scholarship: it feels more like there’s a bias towards cultural materialism. Is there room for the more theoretical fields, like philosophy?
MJ: I have to think about that…but one great Public Humanities project at Lehigh fits into this idea. The Southside project has excavated the footprint of Lehigh University, what working class areas were replaced with new buildings.

LH: I’m not hearing a focus on American, but on local – you could talk about theoretical ideas meeting the local community where they are.

MJ: You can bring the theoretical register into digital work.

Glenn Hendler: Fordham would have an opportunity to be international through partnerships with global ramifications.

Patrick Hornbeck: “localist” bias – e.g. in the UK there would be a UK bias. It’s about reaching out into the spaces around the institution. To answer Eva’s question, in the modern world, philosophy and theology groups can reach out to religious communities.

EM: Mentioned a program bringing Latin instruction to schools nationwide. Also has a similar problem with the turnover of instructors (like the turnover of graduating students), so is cultivating fellow institutions to help make sure that a student will always be involved.

MJ: To add to that – so much of this work is about cutting a path that others can follow.

Elizabeth Cornell: You’ve mentioned a few times that there’s no director, so is there no guaranteed funding?

MJ: We have a promise every year and a cushion to draw on, e.g. for the consortium, Yale promised to fund years 1 and 4. We can also rely on the $35,000 from Yale to create programming.

EC: Does the status with no director influence the status of the program and of students wanting to take part?

MJ: We’re mainly limited by the amount of time the organizers have, so we can’t build on the initiative further, but that doesn’t affect students’ interest, like the Graduate Students Working Group.

DH: You focus not just on knowledge but on how you present it. How does this work with the assessment of different types of labour? In the same way, how do Public Humanities jobs fit into tenure decisions?

MJ: Public Humanities jobs still require stellar dissertations, so tenure is still based on writing. Eventually there will be a project that will make the leap for a dissertation or tenure, and it will probably be digital.

Key questions on how to assess alternative types of academic work – focus on the process rather than the product, as well as the knowledge produced and the student’s takeaway.

GH: Mentioned the Imagining America Tenure Project (for which we had a reading), which addresses just this question – how do public projects fit into tenure deliberations.

John Drummond: There are probably things that people could think about in terms of philosophy that would fit into the public humanities model described here – e.g. food ethics with regard to food deserts, agriculture. More abstractly, students could talk about philosophies of ways of life. Also emphasized that it’s so important to take these events off-campus, or community members won’t attend.