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How to Institutionalize Public Humanities Projects

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Abstract

Public Humanities projects notoriously begin with the bootstrapping commitment of one or two long-suffering and visionary individuals. If they can make it past the turbulent narrows of their beginnings, they often only endure through unrecognized and little-rewarded labor. Gatherings of public humanists can be exercises in commiseration. When you determine that you have enough funding to last one more year, celebration is in order. Such travails naturally lead to the question of how public humanities programs can move beyond being nice extras to become more central to the concerns of our home institutions. How, in short, can the work of public humanists be institutionalized and become part of the everyday humdrum of academic life rather than the desperate scrabbling of the righteous, committed, frantic, and overtired?

Keywords: public humanities; institutions; stories; funding; mission

Institutions and publics: where are the public humanities?

The public humanities have rightly oriented themselves toward “publics” variously conceived. They have made innovative efforts to think of programming as a collaborative enterprise that runs against the grain of individualistic expertise so common in humanistic work. Nonetheless, reflections on the public humanities pay less nuanced attention to their specific location within institutions of higher education and how such institutions operate, less attention, in other words, to the material grounds in which programming subsists.¹ Such reflection when it happens, often hums with the humanist’s familiar anguish about having good work underappreciated. Consequently, we attend less to institutions or administrations as publics in themselves, as audiences or collaborators that must be engaged and whose concerns need to be listened to seriously as part of the work that public humanists do. Having worked for 15 years as a dean developing what has been a small but award-winning and reasonably well-recognized public humanities program in our region, it has seemed to me at times that the skills that public humanists bring to the table—storytelling, attention to detail, awareness of audience, nuanced interpretation—tend to fall away when

¹ Exceptions to this general rule are often primarily concerned with whether neoliberal institutions serve a public purpose properly considered and whether or even if such scholarship “counts” in the regimes of faculty promotion and tenure. See, for instance, Kathleen Fitzpatrick 2021, 175–76.

imagining the workings and the leadership of their institutions and the needs, hopes, and desires that characterize institutions at a macro level.²

Such neglect is pervasive in humanist discussions of institutions and is often accompanied by an implicitly or explicitly adversarial stance. In conference round tables, essays, and coffee shop conversations, this adversarial relationship functions at the level of assumption that can be discerned more in random comments rather than sustained arguments. Consider a couple of asides in works that are justly considered essential texts defining the “how-to” and “wherefore” of public humanities. In the first paragraph of his often-cited blog post on the how-to’s of the public humanities, Steven Lubar asserts, “It is not about you.”

Start not by looking at what you, your discipline, or the university needs and wants, but by what individuals and communities outside the university need and want. It is not, “We’re from the university, and we’re here to help,” but, “What are you doing already, and how can we participate? How can we be useful?” It is not about telling people facts. It is about a dialogue, a sharing of authority, knowledge, and expertise.³

In another much-cited essay, “Public First,” Sheila Brennan iterates this worthy idea, asserting, “To do public digital humanities, the ‘public’ needs to come first. Always.”⁴ In a final example from an otherwise inspiring essay on the history of the development of public humanities at Yale, Matthew Frye Jacobson notes that, after some bootstrapping, they received some appreciative if still suspect attention: “Somewhere along the way, our administration began to like us—not necessarily for the right reasons: rather more as a PR investment on Yale’s behalf, but never mind—and we garnered a modest budget for programming, projects, and student support.”⁵

The public and service-oriented focus of these essays, like public humanities work more generally, is laudable, reflecting Kathleen Fitzpatrick’s ideal of “generous thinking.” Nonetheless, I find myself offering two cheers. Hedging a bit. Saying, “Yes, but...” As represented here, our typical framework fails to understand institutions as social organisms driven by their own needs, hopes, and desires. They are shaped by foundational stories and ideals and by motivating constructs that cannot be understood as secondary to a social mission but as part and parcel of it. I agree with Judith Butler when she suggests the wall we create between thinking of the public and thinking of our institutions should be broken down:

[Public] worlds are not over there, beyond the walls, into which scholars occasionally enter to provide goods and services; rather, those various publics frame the way scholarship and teaching are undertaken, the questions asked, the hypotheticals with which we begin, the purpose for which we undertake our various projects. The public is

² I note the public humanities programming at Messiah University by way of illustration below. Readers interested in the general shape of public humanities at our relatively small and private university can see the home page of the Center for Public Humanities: https://www.messiah.edu/info/20316/center_for_public_humanities. Public Humanities at Messiah includes other work that is not specifically housed in the Center even while the Center seeks to support publicly oriented projects through other programming across the University.

³ Lubar 2014.

⁴ Brennan 2016.

⁵ Jacobson 2021, 168.

in the university from the beginning and includes students, staff, administrators, and faculty.⁶

For Butler, understanding that our public is in some ways already part and parcel of who we are rather than entities “out there” is part of an effort to transform the university and its purposes from within, providing a better ground from which the humanities might be defended. My simpler point is that if we approach the university in the same manner that we approach other publics, we are better positioned to create programming that becomes vital, or at least important, to our institutions. Understanding the institution as public, or perhaps as composed of various publics involved in what we do, means we bring to those “internal” conversations all the collaborative and other-oriented skills we bring to communities supposedly outside the university. That process implies that we foreground listening, understanding, and developing scholarly projects in concert rather than in friction with an institution’s motivating purposes. The generous other-directedness that we bring to our work needs to be brought to bear, perhaps even first brought to bear, on the educational communities of which we are a part and as they are embodied in the institution’s sustaining structures, cultures, and ways of being.

Knowing your own stories, and those of others

Viewed in this light, Lubar’s dicta takes on a slightly different resonance. Lubar is completely right. It is not about you. However, it is, in part, about your institution. His declaration applies to your engagement with your university or college as much as it applies to other community groups. In this respect, the first rule of institutionalizing a program is similar to the first rule of fundraising, as fraught and compromised as some faculty feel the field of fundraising is. That first rule is it is not about you. Make sure the stories you tell about your work are fundamentally about the person, persons, or organizations whose attention, affection, and interest you are trying to engage. Care about them enough that you care about the ways that your story—your program—can further their stories and dreams. Too often, in seeking the favor of our institutions or our donors, we are like the date who spends the evening talking about himself. After failure, we conclude that we just need to get better at telling our stories or else that our institution is so obtuse they just do not get how valuable and important we really are. Instead, the most important thing we can do is hear, understand, and value our institution’s stories. We need to figure out how our story can possibly contribute to what, in the eyes of the institution, is going to be a much larger and more important story that it tells about itself.

A practical example. Once, after giving a talk about the public humanities in Baltimore, I headed home and spent the evening with our institution’s president at a fundraiser for our local symphony in Harrisburg. We talked about how I spent the day telling the story of Messiah University and our great work in humanities research for the common good, at a time when our university was seeking to make the case for our benefit to the common good of the region. I also discussed the ways that we were getting students involved in our public humanities projects, connecting to her student-centered focus and the reality of our status as a teaching institution. I, of course, did tell her the story about our latest successes in public research; those stories are surely important. But, primarily, through discussing the good work we were doing in public humanities research, I talked with her about how I thought we

⁶ Butler 2022, 47.

were enhancing and amplifying a bit of the story that she cares about the most, the story of Messiah University, its students, and their value to Central Pennsylvania. Lest this all sound a bit too slick and mercenary, I should say that I believe in and am passionate about these things, too. Most of us are within our own contexts. The place I live and work and the faculty who work with me matter to me, and my students' learning and development as human beings are always more important than any scholarly project that might be undertaken. This is just another way of saying that the institution matters. When I am thinking about our public projects, I am always simultaneously thinking about the multiple stakeholders that such projects will have, stakeholders that include, rather than exclude, the various interests of my institution.

When we ask to have our work "institutionalized," we are asking that the things we care about individually become a part of a larger institutional story. Therefore, we have to be good at listening to and telling other people's stories, particularly the story of our institutions. Insofar as an institution is concerned, your program qua program is always only a small part of a much bigger and more complex institutional story. This is true even if you make bold claims to have made great progress on solving world hunger, climate change, or racial injustice. No matter how big your program's ambitions are, insofar as it is undertaken as a program within your institution, the institution's story is always going to be paramount to the people who determine your program's sustainability. This is no different than the relationships we bear with every "external" public. The work we do with such publics will never be the only thing they are doing, and often, they may not think of it as the most important thing they are doing. Figuring out how your story is or can become part of these larger stories that others carry with them is fundamental, a truth whether you are engaging a local group working on housing shortages or a dean or committee determining the priorities of your institution relative to the humanities.

Such engagement is enabled by several forms of practical knowledge: know your institution, know your programs well enough to speak about them in several different idioms and know yourself. To begin, embrace that subject of yawns and eye-rolls, your institutional mission and identity statement. Such statements tend to claim originality while pretty much saying what everyone else is saying in one way or another. On the other hand, they are portals into your institution's story with its meanings and values. They are teleological claims that the leaders of your institution take seriously even if no one else does. Within institutions, these bland statements carry a penumbra of interlocking meanings and institutional memories that are embodied in the various workings of your institution, including its planning and decision-making processes. The most innocuous mission statement takes on sharp and specific meanings within the context of specific communities. Most effective institutions attempt to navigate the thicket of troubles that is higher education by means of its guiding stories, metaphors, and rituals, most typically embodied at the highest order in a sense of mission and a sense of identity.

In our case, Messiah University's mission and identity statement makes the following claims:

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. The University is committed to an embracing evangelical spirit rooted in the Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan traditions of the Christian Church. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character, and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership, and reconciliation in church and society.

Messiah claims to be a University of the “applied and liberal arts.” In the jargon of higher education, this indicates that we are a “comprehensive institution” with a balanced array of liberal arts and professional programs. But more than that, in our institutional history, this claim affirms that we provide an education that makes a practical difference in the world. In a conflict as a young faculty member with our university president, I was chastised for comparing what we did to Dickinson College, the liberal arts college down the road that many of my colleagues in the humanities idealize. My president firmly and flatly said my comparison was poor as we were more like Valparaiso University, another comprehensive institution. A student’s ability to apply the education that they receive, especially in service to others, is a paramount value. This practical orientation is reinforced by a mission that calls attention to our roots in the “Anabaptist, Pietist, and Wesleyan” traditions of the Christian faith. This origin story signals particular kinds of Christian allegiance with particular kinds of values. Rootedness in these traditions reinforces a preference for practice and the experiential. Anabaptists, Pietists, and Wesleyans are notable for their emphasis on the practice of the Christian faith rather than reflection on the Christian faith. Theological and philosophical traditions of learning springing from these traditions are thinner than the Catholic intellectual tradition or that of the Reformed churches. Nevertheless, these traditions of the Christian faith remain robust due to their emphasis on community life together, the pursuit of justice for and in service to others, the personal experience of divine presence, and the pursuit of right living as a result of that experience. These traditions ask fewer questions like “What is the world for?” and more questions like “What can we do to make the world better?” Our mission statement reflects this practical orientation by emphasizing specific ends, especially the end of living meaningfully and justly together: service, leadership, and reconciliation.

This service-oriented ethos can frustrate our traditional humanities disciplines. We are, perhaps, not as robustly equipped as others to joust with narratives about the impracticality of the liberal arts. Nevertheless, these institutional stories have offered doorways for accomplishments in the public humanities. We justify our programs significantly on the real-world difference such programs would make for our students and our surrounding community. We foreground the ways in which our programs help students achieve the ends of reconciliation and lead a service-oriented life, even as we have put a premium on providing educational access to underserved communities and on programming that addresses questions of racial justice and reconciliation.

Messiah’s mission and identity are unique, and, as a religiously identified institution, it has frameworks to draw upon and also limitations and structures to work within that other institutions would not. However, working in a way that extends mission and identity would remain consistent across any institution. One of our primary partners in community engagement has been Harrisburg University, an institution that in many ways could not be more different than Messiah. Harrisburg University defines its mission as one that offers “innovative academic and research programs in science and technology that respond to local and global needs.” Its vision is “to address the need of Pennsylvania’s Capital Region for increased educational opportunities in applied science and technology-related fields.”⁷ Drawing on those internal stories has enabled Harrisburg University to contribute its own tech-oriented expertise to our common project to discover, create, and disseminate new knowledge about the history and culture of our region. Similarly, although public

⁷ “Harrisburg University of Science and Technology: Our Mission and Values.” <https://www.harrisburgu.edu/about/mission-and-values/>.

land-grant universities' relationship with the public in their regions has sometimes been strained in recent decades due to increasing privatization, most of these institutions retain robust statements of the primary importance their educational work has to their state and region, a long and honored history of public education for the common good that can be built upon in articulating the significance of public humanities work to the institution's present and future purpose.⁸

Beyond mission, knowing your institution also means staying up to speed on the details of the strategic plan and vision statements. If anything, strategic plans are even less unique than mission statements. Nevertheless, as an internal ritual of storytelling and vision-casting, strategic planning is an institutional road map, saying through aspirational goals, spreadsheets, and data dashboards, "This is who we are; this is what we would like to become." If you are lucky, your particular project may get in on the ground floor and be central to the strategic plan. More likely, you are going to have to be nimble and plan every four or five years to recast what you are doing in terms of your strategic planning processes. No Vice President of Academic Affairs anywhere is going to say to their president, "I know the strategic plan says we ought to be doing X, but I decided to do Y." Such a VP might (MIGHT!) say, "We're working to fulfill Institutional Sustainability Objective Three in our strategic plan on engaging the public about our value to the region. I've got this interesting new public humanities project that I think we should invest in, and I'd like to ask the development office to write some grants to generate further support."

At Messiah University, we shifted gears and recast our public humanities story in terms of multiple iterations of strategic plans. In the early 2000s, the institution was very keen on demonstrating our significance to our region and on developing programming that reflected a new school structure. The Center for Public Humanities was born. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, strategic planning emphasized developing student and faculty engagement with digital technology, which led to our programs in the digital humanities.⁹ Finally, in the 2020s, we were granted permission to pursue a Lilly Endowment grant, which we successfully sought to support antiracist work in our region. This last project built on diversity goals that have been a standard feature of our institutional strategic plan for the past 30 years and are embedded in the institution's mission statement under the category of reconciliation.¹⁰

These opportunities relied on our specific mission and self-understanding, as well as the institution's planning for the future. As similar as such statements and planning processes can seem from the outside, each institution embodies them in different ways and would have to be imagined anew in each institution. There are, of course, a host of other things that could be said about knowing your institution and its stories and practices. Know your

⁸ The most obvious and significant of these might be the articulation of the Wisconsin Idea: "One of the longest and deepest traditions surrounding the University of Wisconsin, the Wisconsin Idea signifies a general principle: that education should influence people's lives beyond the boundaries of the classroom." <https://www.wisc.edu/wisconsin-idea/>. Whether the relationship is one of causation or correlation, it hardly seems accidental that the University of Wisconsin has a robust and exemplary program in the public humanities. See <https://humanities.wisc.edu/about/>.

⁹ See especially the websites associated with The Digital Harrisburg Initiative (<https://digitalharrisburg.com/>) and with Cinemablography (<http://www.cinemablography.org/about.html>). The same period gave birth to a new major in Digital Media that provides indirect support for our work in Digital Humanities.

¹⁰ See the following website for a picture of the Thriving Congregations Program: <https://www.messiah.edu/thrivingtogether>. Thriving Congregations is not housed within our Center for Public Humanities, but draws regularly on other public humanities work tracing the history of racial injustice and resistance to it in our region.

policies—especially budgetary and personnel policies—and know them well, not least so you can figure out ways to bend them toward your advantage. Know your people, the administrators you have to work with, the staff that you will have to call on for assistance, and the faculty you hope to bring to ongoing projects. All of these individual stories collectively help define what is important and what is possible at your institution.

Of course, even doing all these things, successes can sometimes feel few, and they can seem short-lived, not least because your institution's story is caught up in the general story of higher education in the United States, where precarity is the rule, not just for the humanities but for institutions generally. In our case, like other small institutions, we have endured shrinking resources, precipitously declining numbers of undergraduate students majoring in the humanities, and shrinking numbers of faculty as the institution faces difficult cuts to remain on a solid financial footing. These are factors related to institutional stability, not just issues administrators dream up out of animus toward the liberal arts. As a result, even with generous and general support for the work we are doing in the public humanities, our programming feels increasingly constrained by factors outside any single institution's control: fewer students to be involved in our work, fewer faculty to supervise that work, and smaller budgets all around. In short, getting your program "institutionalized" may not mean everything it once meant. But these factors, too, are part of a larger institutional story and concern, and so figuring out how programming can speak into such difficult institutional circumstances is part of the work, not just an impediment to it.

Knowing yourself

I'll conclude with encouragement to not just know and tell your institution's story well. Be sure to know yourself. When I was first asked to do some writing and speaking on "institutionalizing public humanities programs," I read the word "institutionalizing" with a sudden catch in my throat. My thoughts, unbeknownst to those who asked me to speak, went immediately to my father. Having been moved to a dementia care unit after he had descended some way into the fatal grip of Alzheimer's, he had a conversation one day with my mother, the one family member whom he still recognized. My mom asked him if he knew what was happening to him. He replied, "Well, I know I've been institutionalized."

This memory is personal, but it does speak to a larger discourse about which we remain uneasy. In our culture, the "institutional" man or woman is not the one who gets the romantic lead in books and movies. From *Huck Finn* to *Animal House*, from *Invisible Man* to *Girl Interrupted*, institutions and their operations can signify loss of freedom, loss of creativity, loss of passion, and loss, indeed, of identity. They signify death. Subconsciously, we assume that institutions restrain. Depending on them, we think, means losing something more vibrant and visionary than what we would do if given the time and resources, especially if we were left to our own devices. Sometimes, lurking unacknowledged beneath the question of how our important projects can become institutional priorities lies the unstated question, "How can I get the resources to do what I want to do and be left alone to do it in the way I think it ought to be done?"

My disappointingly short answer to that question is, "You can't." One part of institutionalizing our passions is a long-term negotiation, not just with our institutions but with ourselves. Successful programs are born, not least, through a process of giving up some measure of control, and some measure even of our own dreams, in the hope that they can become something larger. Institutionalizing what we do is, in part, figuring out how our stories, practices, and passions can be meshed with—and sometimes substantially altered

by—the stories, practices, and desires of these entities we call institutions. Institutionalization means coming to terms with the fact that our individual dreams will not be realized through institutions. But dreams of various sorts can be realized and sustained as they are manifested through collaboration with our institutions, our community partners, our students, fellow faculty, and many others on the road to becoming realized as a public humanities project. That project will not be what we originally imagined it might be, but perhaps, in the end, it will be more than we could have hoped.

Peter Kerry Powers is Professor of English and Director of the Center for Public Humanities at Messiah University, where he recently completed service as an Academic Dean after 15 years. In that period, he implemented and oversaw public humanities projects, including projects focused on digital humanities, anti-racist education, and other programs for community education. He has published two books and numerous articles focused on issues of race, ethnicity, and religion in American literature, as well as work on teaching and higher education. He is working on a book on liberal arts education in the United States. His professional website may be found at www.peterkerrypowers.com.

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