Civic Engagement in the Wake of Katrina
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Introduction

Amy Koritz and George J. Sanchez

New Orleans is a place where the “slaves of the city” still ask “who will betray us today.”

—Brenda Marie Osbey

Democracy must be reborn in each generation. Education is the midwife.

—John Dewey

The local community must be the microcosm of our pluralistic, inclusive democracy, and the realization of our democratic ideals. Community is, in fact, democracy incarnate, where culture is woven into the fabric of our daily lives, not worn as a decoration on its surface, or observed from afar as the province of the privileged few.

—Sondra Myers

Everything that happened at Charity during the storm was a failure . . . everything bad was a failure of the system. Everything good was a success of individuals.

—Joel Rene Morrissey, chief resident at Charity Hospital

ON AUGUST 29, 2005, THE CITY OF NEW ORLEANS and the surrounding Gulf Coast region was hit by a monstrous hurricane named Katrina, which exposed the underlying racial and economic inequalities and public corruption that mark so many cities in the United States at the beginning of the
twenty-first century. Over the next few days, as the rest of the United States and the world witnessed the lack of adequate planning and preparation, which left thousands of residents to struggle for their very survival in the wake of Katrina, residents of New Orleans realized that they had experienced one of the most catastrophic failures of public investment that had ever been perpetrated on a resident citizen population in the history of the United States. Now, three years past those tragic days at the end of the summer of 2005, it is clear that the U.S. federal government and local state, parish, and city governments still have not provided the economic and social support necessary to reconstruct New Orleans to any semblance of what it once was. Yet with 70 percent of its prestorm population now in the city, those individuals who today call New Orleans home continue to hope for support in rebuilding the homes, lives, and institutions necessary for the “Big Easy” to once again become a beacon of distinctive culture and resounding fortitude.

By focusing on individuals and organizations involved in civic engagement work, this volume offers a window into one aspect of this recovery. Civic engagement work before Hurricane Katrina was not easy given the broad structural inequalities and palpable history of racism and political corruption in the region. In 2004, Louisiana had the second-highest rate of poverty in the nation and the fifth-lowest rate of median household income, with almost 37 percent of its black residents considered impoverished.¹ The flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina and the breaks in the city’s levees not only exposed residents in various neighborhoods to potential death and destruction; it also decimated neighborhoods in the long term, leading between 30 and 40 percent of the city’s population to seek permanent or semipermanent exile in other cities. Some civic engagement projects stopped in the wake of Katrina because the very neighborhoods where engagement took place had disappeared.

Yet, as several of this volume’s essays make clear, civic engagement work has rebounded tremendously in the rebuilding process, with new forms of democratic citizenship flourishing in ways that most did not think possible—and that were often not possible—pre-Katrina. We believe that there is much to be learned from closely examining civic engagement in the wake of Katrina in an effort to go beyond pat answers about how to deal with natural disasters or survive in the wake of extreme tragedy. Indeed, Katrina exposed the kind of community fissures that complicate most efforts at civic engagement and the possibilities for citizen participation that can arise when traditional politics devolve into inaction and stalemate. We un-
dertook this volume partly to ask ourselves whether it is even possible for civic engagement work to cope with a disaster that is rooted in a long history of racial injustice, economic disparity, and political malfeasance.

As the editors of this volume, our paths to putting together this book couldn’t have been more different. Neither of us was born in New Orleans, but we are both intimately involved in civic engagement issues. Amy Koritz is a longtime professor in the English Department at Tulane University in New Orleans. She came to civic engagement in higher education almost inadvertently. Having been asked by a provost in the late 1990s to lead a project to improve the educational experience and retention of first-year students, she determined that connecting them powerfully to their immediate environment was probably the most effective means of achieving this goal. As a result, she began instituting programs that introduced students to New Orleans, enabling them to learn more about its compelling culture and deep problems. The project ended with the tenure of that provost, but by that time it was evident how significant an impact civic engagement could have on college students. By the time Katrina struck in 2005, Koritz was persuaded that most institutions of higher education were neglecting their obligation to the public good by failing to address how undergraduate education prepares students to be effective citizens as well as productive workers. The aftermath of Katrina transformed this conviction into an imperative.

George J. Sanchez is not a resident of New Orleans and had never visited the city before Hurricane Katrina. Invited to give a lecture at Tulane University the spring after Katrina hit, he was struck by the experience, intensity, and sadness that pervaded the community of civic engagement workers he met while there. And, like Professor Koritz, he was convinced that the stories of survival and recovery he was hearing deserved a wider, more national audience. As a scholar of the history of Los Angeles, he had experienced the similar sense of shock, despair, and energy that accompanied that city’s effort to rebuild itself in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots. But he was also acutely aware that as a newcomer to New Orleans he had much to learn and absorb about the uniqueness of the region and its peoples.

Many features of New Orleans history, politics, and culture are unique to it and must be explained to those unfamiliar with the contours of the city. First of all, New Orleans is above all else a city of neighborhoods—a fact that proved critical to the unfolding of civic engagement work before and after Hurricane Katrina. The spatial organization of Orleans Parish
(the Louisiana version of a county) can be traced back to the French arpent system. This system created long, narrow plots of land, each of which had access to the only transportation route available, the Mississippi River. The city’s streets still reflect the geography of these early plantations, as does its organization into wards. For many native New Orleanians, their ward defines their primary loyalty, and various wards have long associations with particular populations; the Seventh Ward, for example, was historically home to the skilled craftsmen of the building trades. Stretching back toward Lake Pontchartrain and slightly downriver from the French Quarter, this area was settled by free people of color and sustained a strong inter-generational network of masonry workers, ironworkers, bricklayers, and carpenters that facilitated the development of an African American and Catholic middle class locally referred to as Creole. The Lower Ninth Ward, with which the entire country became familiar when the wall of the Industrial Canal, which borders its western edge, collapsed, was overwhelmingly poor and African American but also had a higher rate of owner-occupied houses than the city as a whole (59.0 as opposed to 46.5 percent for Orleans Parish).3 Devastated by flooding, this community is called “lower” not because it is on lower ground but because it is farther down the Mississippi River than the rest of the Ninth Ward. The ward system is complicated by an array of neighborhood names that reflect different historical formations, some physically descriptive (such as the Garden District) and others referencing real estate developments (Pontchartrain Park, Lakeview, Gentilly Woods), streets and landmarks (Audubon, Carrollton), or local designations whose history has long been forgotten by those who live in and use them now (Gert Town, Irish Channel).

The geography of New Orleans is best understood by reference to the Mississippi River since the natural levees formed by the annual flooding of the river created the high ground on which the city was first built. This high ground (the “sliver by the river”) suffered considerably less flooding than other parts of the city, was the first to rebound following Katrina and is generally more affluent than many low-lying neighborhoods. The neighborhoods farther from the river were settled as the ability to drain swampland and protect the city from flooding increased. The most damaged white neighborhood of New Orleans, Lakeview, was developed in the early twentieth century on newly drained land near Lake Pontchartrain. This community rests five to seven feet below sea level and took on five to fifteen feet of water when the adjacent Seventeenth Street Canal was breached. In comparison, the French Quarter is nine feet above sea level.
and did not flood at all. Although the confidence of scientists and the avarice of developers combined to increase settlement by both whites and blacks in low-lying Orleans Parish throughout the twentieth century, the fact that the majority of the population was African American and historic housing patterns ensured that much of the higher ground was inhabited by whites meant that the impact of the storm and its aftermath was racially skewed.

Moreover, the lesson drawn by many New Orleanians from the multiple failures of government during Hurricane Katrina was that they are on their own. Local and state governments failed to prepare for and address the needs of citizens without access to cars, credit cards, and social networks outside the city or to facilitate their evacuation. Government was also directly responsible for the horrible conditions faced by those in the

Fig. 1. New Orleans neighborhoods. (Map by Richard Campanella.)
Superdome and Convention Center in the days following the flooding. Although the victims were tax-paying citizens of a city, state, and country that acknowledge their responsibility to attend to the needs of communities in crisis, none of these entities was able to do so in a timely and efficient manner. While it is easy to argue that the corruption and incompetence that have long plagued New Orleans and Louisiana contributed mightily to these failures, which they no doubt did, to do so risks ignoring the equally inept federal response.

On one level, the increase in civic engagement following Katrina that Richard Campanella documents in his contribution to this collection can be attributed to the failure of government-run institutional and bureaucratic support systems and processes to engage and communicate with their constituents. Large nonprofit relief organizations such as the Red Cross, however, didn’t seem to perform much better. The stories of success that came out of the receding floodwaters tended to feature individuals or small grassroots groups that came together in the face of a compelling need. And this pattern of institutional shortfalls and individualized achievement in the realm of civic engagement held true in higher education as well.

The institutions of higher education in New Orleans have unique histories that reflect the uneven growth of the city, and these disparities affected their recovery paths in the wake of the disaster. Higher education in New Orleans is dominated by the remnants of Jim Crow and the city’s deeply rooted French Catholic traditions. It is home to the only historically black Catholic university in the country, Xavier University of Louisiana. It contains two public universities. One, the University of New Orleans (UNO), has historically served white students, while the other, Southern University of New Orleans (SUNO), is part of the Southern University System established by the state for African American students. Dillard University, the other private Historically Black College or University (HBCU) in New Orleans, emerged from Protestant roots to become a liberal arts college. The remaining major universities in the city, Loyola and Tulane, are majority white institutions. Loyola, like Xavier, is a Catholic university. Tulane, the only research institution in the city, historically served New Orleans’ white elite.

The response of the universities to the devastation of New Orleans following Katrina varied widely. Under eleven feet of water for several weeks, SUNO is still struggling to rebuild. Dillard University, located in the Gentilly section of the city, took on eight feet of water and was unable to re-
open its campus for a year. While Xavier also suffered flooding, it was not as extensive, and classes resumed on its campus in the spring of 2006. Loyola and Tulane suffered the least damage to their physical facilities (with the exception of Tulane’s Medical School) because they are located on higher ground far from the levee breaches. Students and faculty at both schools returned to campuses minimally marked by flooding and wind damage. All of these universities, however, took a heavy financial hit, and all responded in part by laying off significant numbers of faculty and staff. Tulane also undertook a major restructuring of its schools, combining the sciences and engineering; separating the social sciences, arts, and humanities in their own new School of Liberal Arts; and wiping out a third of its doctoral programs, including those in economics, political science, sociology, English, and French. The manner in which the administrations of Loyola, Tulane, UNO, and SUNO handled these changes led to their censure by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 2007.

Despite high levels of internal turmoil, the universities recognized their role as institutional citizens of a city in crisis and attempted to respond. The success of this response so far has been mixed. Xavier and Dillard are gathering resources to help rebuild their surrounding communities. Amy Koritz’s institution, Tulane, emphasized community service by requiring all undergraduates to complete two service learning classes in order to graduate. It also established a new center focused on urban communities and an institute devoted to education policy. At the same time, however, it dismantled its program in civil engineering (the folks who build levees) and did away with doctoral programs in many of the disciplines that concentrate on urban environments. Because this kind of inconsistency is endemic in higher education, it suggests one way in which the crisis facing New Orleans can serve as a clarifying moment for higher education nationally. The very real demands of the bottom line required that any program too expensive and without adequate prestige or a strong enough constituency to justify its continued support be ruthlessly excised. The fact that many of these programs were the ones most needed to further the institution’s stated commitment to improving its surrounding community was ignored. In consequence, we now have a structurally instantiated imperative (and, for some, a moral one) without the reservoir of knowledge and expertise needed to meet it, at least in the liberal arts.

To be a faculty member in a humanities discipline under such circumstances is not, except in degree, much different from being a faculty mem-
ber in the humanities at most research universities in this country. And it is in this respect that the lessons of Civic Engagement in the Wake of Katrina are most generalizable. Despite the increased rhetoric and student requirements, civic engagement so far remains marginal to the way in which faculty members are evaluated and rewarded. For most faculty members and academic administrators, this is as it should be. As a research university, the dominant view at Tulane remains that peer-reviewed scholarly publication within a discipline is the only appropriate measure of professional productivity. Certainly teaching matters, as does service, but both are relatively less important. Further, Edward Zlotkowski’s observation that “the agenda of a faculty member’s discipline often takes precedence over his or her commitment to institutional priorities” holds true. Thus, here, as elsewhere, the ability of an administration to insist on civic engagement by its faculty, even if the will to do so is present, remains limited. For a faculty member to choose civic engagement in the face of weak institutional support and a discipline-focused culture of setting priorities and allocating respect would seem close to suicidal. What the crisis of Katrina did, however, was present that choice starkly to the consciences of individuals. For some, the result has been a significant movement toward engagement. For others, it has been business as usual.

The consciences of individuals, however crucial to a just society, are an inadequate substitute for competent and responsive bureaucracies that are engaged and flexible enough to understand and address the needs of their constituencies in times of crisis. It is important to consider whether the failures that plagued New Orleans in 2005—and continue to do so—are unique to this place and circumstance or indicative of more widespread problems in the values and priorities that drive public agencies and large nonprofit institutions. Shortly after the storm, Time magazine quoted Louisiana representative Jim McCrery, who complained, “I’ve talked to the White House staff. I’ve talked to FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency]. I’ve talked with the Army. And, of course, I’ve talked with the state office of emergency preparedness. And nobody, federal or state, seems to know how to implement a decision, if we can get a decision.”

This pervasive inability to act on the part of well-educated civil servants and their leaders begs for analysis. One such analysis was provided early on by the sociologist Harvey Molotch, who observed that in a well-functioning bureaucracy crisis provokes “a kind of panic of empathy that trumps organizational habit and individual postures.” Bureaucrats throw out the rule book and have faith that their superiors will support their decisions. In
the aftermath of Katrina, this did not happen. Instead bureaucrats fell back on routine.

In higher education, similar issues emerged. The culture of competitive individualism that governs the careers of scholars and researchers encourages an uneasy combination of personal aggressiveness and organizational conformity that may not be in the best interests of Dewey’s vision of education in a democracy. Like other professionals with obligations to the larger public good—clergy, health care workers, civil servants—educators are often caught between a path to professional advancement that rewards careerist behavior and the public’s expectation that we serve a higher purpose. Postdiluvial New Orleans saw both. There were professors and students from around the country who made, and continue to make, real contributions to the city’s recovery; in this volume, the essays on the Gulf South Youth Action Corps and HOME, New Orleans illustrate just two instances out of many. At the same time, the nonprofit sector in New Orleans was rife with reports of “drive-by” research and opportunistic grant writing that did not even attempt to engage local expertise. Well-intentioned people can have honest disagreements about the value of such work, but there can be little question that local academics struggling to put their professional lives back together would have benefited enormously from being written into projects that they had neither the time nor energy to develop themselves, and to which they could have made real contributions. This too is a form of civic engagement.

For John Dewey, civil society’s power to frame the problems and priorities to which expert professionals devote their energies determined whether those experts were playing their proper role in a democracy. He reasoned that ordinary citizens were best qualified to know their own concerns, even if the experts were best able to develop effective responses to them. His fear, however, was that expert professionals were losing their sense of connection and obligation to this population, instead developing their own insular caste and subculture. Thus, he warned, “A class of experts is inevitably so removed from common interests as to become a class with private interests and private knowledge, which in social matters is no knowledge at all.” Universities do the crucial work of reproducing and maintaining our society’s pool of expertise. Do they have an allied obligation to ensure that ordinary citizens have the information and skills needed to direct the energies of experts in ways that best serve their families and communities? To the extent that Dewey is right in asserting that education is the midwife of democracy, educators bear a responsibility to ordinary
citizens not shared by other professionals. This is the responsibility to ensure that citizens have the tools to insist on a socially effective use of expertise, not in its technical application but in defining the broad goals, and judging the success, of its application. To the extent that this responsibility is in real conflict with the understanding of professional expertise that guides the careers of many academics, we in academia have a problem.

Constructive civic engagement on the part of higher education, however, also requires community partners with the capacity and commitment to partner with university teachers and researchers in good faith. In New Orleans, effective citizen-driven action has frequently been inhibited by a lack of organizational capacity in distressed communities exacerbated by a political culture of insider patronage. The past and continuing poverty of the region plays a part in this circumstance. According to the Bureau of Governmental Research, a local, private, nonpartisan group, the percentage of government-subsidized rental households in New Orleans is holding steady at pre-Katrina levels. Sixty-five percent of the metropolitan region’s very low income households live in the city as opposed to 70 percent prior to the storm. The economic profile of New Orleans has changed little. The racial profile has shifted slightly, reducing the majority held by the African American population and increasing the Hispanic population. Although pockets of well-organized civic action emerged, they were often driven by middle-class professionals with a stake in a specific neighborhood or issue.

Despite the high-profile posturing of government officials in the wake of natural and man-made disasters, weakly organized long-term responses seem to be characteristic of our era of neoconservative politics and color-blind racism. In the immediate aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, for example, under the watch of the first President Bush, the federal government also promised to revitalize South Central Los Angeles, while local government leaders enacted a plan to “Rebuild L.A.” Most of the federal government’s plan, however, consisted of blueprints already available to enact a “Conservative War on Poverty,” consisting of the promotion of enterprise zones, a “Weed and Seed” program light on seeds but heavy on the incarceration of minority youth, and the privatization of school choice to allow parents to send their children to private schools with public dollars. Peter Ueberroth’s Rebuild L.A. initiative also emphasized private initiatives over public sector improvements, and neither did much to slow down the rapid loss of jobs available to South Los Angeles residents. What Los Angeles needed, much like what New Orleans needs today, was an initia-
tive along the lines of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) of the 1930s to resolve chronic joblessness, the lack of economic opportunity, and crumbling public infrastructure. Instead government officials have consistently relied on a private sector with little long-term commitment to bringing about fundamental change or social equity.\textsuperscript{11}

Higher education enters into this situation primarily with short-term supplementary labor and expertise. While some civic organizations have developed ongoing relationships with university faculty members or programs (e.g., the relationship between Broadmoor and the Harvard School of Government described by Pat Evans and Sarah Lewis in this volume), the emerging model for university engagement in the city is a one-to-three-week “residency” where students and their faculty mentors contribute to a project defined by or in consultation with a nonprofit organization with sufficient administrative capacity to organize and help supervise such projects. For local universities, the dominant models remain single-day service projects and semester-long service learning assignments or internships.

Both general recovery efforts in New Orleans and the interventions of higher education through volunteerism have occurred in an era of neoliberalism in the United States that emphasizes privatization of the public sphere or what Lisa Duggan calls “the transfer of wealth and decision-making from public, more-or-less accountable decision-making bodies to individual or corporate, unaccountable hands.”\textsuperscript{12} In the wake of Katrina, most of the recovery work has been outsourced, from debris removal to levee reconstruction, with politically connected corporations reaping benefits without necessarily being subject to adequate public scrutiny. Likewise, university project managers and volunteer students are asked to perform vital services that were formerly performed by paid government employees, a situation that pushed at least one New Orleans historian, Lawrence N. Powell, to ask, “Can the methods of a nineteenth-century barn raising drag a twenty-first century disaster area from the mud and the muck?”\textsuperscript{13} In what Powell refers to as a “market-focused recovery,” how do individuals interested in sustained civic engagement navigate these ideological waters?

Civic engagement, under these conditions, will be understood by students to consist primarily of charity work and what might be termed “laboratories of practice.” In the arts and humanities, in particular, it is extremely difficult to conceptualize and maintain partnerships that might enable students and professors to embark on sustained, reciprocal action in the sur-
rounding community. The infrastructure required by such partnerships is beyond the capacity of individual faculty members without external funding, and university units charged with facilitating and overseeing engagement too often focus on short-term experiences. The complex reasons that make it difficult for universities to involve students in forms of engagement that model ongoing, collective, and collaborative action also threaten the ability of the arts and humanities disciplines to remake themselves so as to support such a goal. Despite ongoing efforts by many, including Ira Harkavy of the University of Pennsylvania, David Scobey of Bates College, and Julia Reinhardt Lupton of the University of California at Irvine, the ability of higher education to do otherwise is apparently limited.  

In New Orleans, these dominant forms of university-based engagement reinforce the tendency to organize civic action around the short-term goals of private voluntary associations and nonprofit organizations or around the pedagogical objectives of individual courses. What is missing is an ongoing dialogue that connects education with multidisciplinary strategies for addressing community needs and building on community assets. Perhaps this absence simply reflects the widespread laissez-faire attitude toward the public sphere that assumes it is nobody’s responsibility in particular and certainly not that of higher education. Perhaps it is an unintended consequence of the confluence of a student focus on marketable credentials and a faculty reward system that encourages individual achievement at the expense of group endeavor. The danger, though, is that in the absence of concerted action universities will end up teaching students that civic engagement is ancillary to their lives as citizens.

Nevertheless, the ongoing push toward increased civic engagement in higher education is a positive development that should be supported through analysis of the dangers it poses as well as the potential it embodies. One critical question to ask is to what extent this rhetorical and actual advocacy of the civic responsibility of higher education also contributes to increased privatization of the public sphere. For example, government officials used the flooding that devastated the New Orleans school system as an opportunity to experiment with the privatization of the public system, more readily offering charter school startups than restoring longstanding, if always struggling, neighborhood schools. Individual actors from higher education are often critical to this trend toward privatization, offering short-term expertise to desperate parents and underfunded teachers willing to accept any help to get schools open and operational. The
general trend toward privatization of community institutions can therefore be fundamentally supported in a time of recovery without thinking through the long-term implications for neighborhood survival and public responsibility. Indeed, this usually happens in such a way that local actors end up denigrating the public sector, if not the public sphere entirely, seeing the role of government in recovery and restoration as minimal or restricting, while enhancing the reputation of privatized solutions that have little chance of successfully remaining in place in the long run. These fundamental issues need to be addressed by all who work in civic engagement, but they are especially urgent in a time of crisis and recovery when the failings of government seem so obvious. Crises should not prevent us from carefully examining the long-term consequences of private efforts, including those of higher education.

This volume is organized in part chronologically, in part by theme or emphasis. Given the diversity of voices, projects, and methodologies represented in this collection, we were pleasantly surprised by the relative coherence that emerged in the issues raised and the approaches to civic engagement taken by the authors. Most contributors tend, for example, to work toward building on the assets of a community rather than toward correcting its perceived deficits. This approach assumes that community members are knowledgeable about their own strengths, able to assess their community’s weaknesses realistically, and interested in achieving collective goals that will benefit themselves and those around them. It assumes that civic engagement is always a two-way street, requiring deliberation and decision making on the part of all participants not just the experts. With roots in the community-organizing and education philosophies and practices of Saul Alinsky, Myles Horton, and Paolo Freire, such asset-based models of community development attempt to build social capital and expand the voices and agency of community members in their own shared future. Because university researchers, particularly in the social sciences, have often focused on reporting, analyzing, and putting forward solutions to the problems of communities not their own, an approach to civic engagement that challenges this model also challenges the ways in which university faculty members understand their roles in the places they study. Arguably, however, asset-based approaches to communities are well suited to the arts and humanities as currently practiced. Asset-based community development, with its focus on dialogue, shared learning, and respect for multiple
perspectives, overlaps methodologically with the participatory pedagogies and attentiveness to the voices of the marginalized and disadvantaged common in these disciplines.

Although the contributors include social scientists, community organizers, and nonprofit leaders, more than half would identify themselves as artists or humanists. As such, they tend to place particular value on creative expression, dialogue, and the complex interrelations of place, history, and personal experience. They see the work of civic engagement in terms of relationships and discourses rather than institutions and outcomes. This emphasis on process, while not discounting the importance of completing projects and producing results, can lead to definitions of success that assign greater weight to participant-defined goals and qualitative measures of growth. Thus, the arts community in New Orleans has embraced the role of the arts in providing spiritual sustenance and healing, outcomes appropriately evaluated by subjective measures. Too often, though, those working in other sectors—such as housing, health care, the environment, or family services—perceive the arts and culture as secondary concerns to be addressed only after the many pressing issues in their own domains have been tackled. Overwhelmingly the contributors to this volume would disagree. They have, for example, seen the power of creative expression to strengthen youths’ belief in their own agency, help them resist peer pressure, and find the support and information they need to make better choices. Neglecting such programs might, in fact, make it less likely that we would ever successfully address many of those other needs.

At the same time, for most local university-based artists (with the exception of those in Xavier University’s Community Arts Program) the predominant mode of civic engagement rests on the “outreach” model. What, though, might change in the education and experience of university students in the arts and humanities if civic engagement did not stop with tutoring children, making famous artists and writers available for workshops in public schools, or providing free performances of Shakespeare’s plays to local students? The implications of projects such as Mat Schwarzman’s Creative Forces theater troupe and the multipartner community arts network of HOME, New Orleans, for how we think about the content and format of arts and humanities education are interesting and profound. What might a college curriculum in theater look like that was less oriented toward Broadway and Hollywood and more focused on the schools and community centers where so many ordinary citizens in fact experience the arts?16
This question, of course, gives rise to several others that transcend the arts and humanities disciplines. In multiple selections and a variety of contexts in this volume, contributors question the proper balance between respect for professional knowledge and open-door participation in planning and decision making. They acknowledge and worry about the fact that some of them have benefited professionally from the attention and sympathy extended to New Orleans after the floods. They also express concern over the ways and degree to which outside experts have exploited the laboratory provided by disaster in the service of their own agendas. These concerns raise questions that should be central to how university-based actors see their roles in communities. At the same time, just as academics will sometimes allow personal goals to outweigh their obligations to engage in equitable and mutually beneficial partnerships with communities, so will nonprofit and community leaders sometimes let the immediate goals of their organizations or their personal agendas blind them to the need for a larger perspective based on the multiple kinds of knowledge that universities bring to the table. Balance, well seasoned with transparency, is everything.

Finally, we would like to comment on the question of scale. There is a bias in this volume toward small-scale, close to the ground engagement, perhaps at the expense of projects involving larger, more established institutions or policy- and advocacy-oriented organizations. Despite Carole Rosenstein’s plea to the arts community to focus on the policy implications of its programs and goals, as well as the fact that neighborhood associations do enter the policy arena, often effectively, the bias here is toward projects that enable individual voices to be heard. For artists and humanists, it may be difficult to proceed otherwise since the act of creative expression and the interpretive tools of close reading are skewed so markedly toward individual experience. The inevitable tension between the complex particularity of experience and the abstract requirements of policy documents poses a challenge to civic engagement in the arts and humanities. To what extent does preserving and valuing the experiences of small groups and individuals hamper our ability to participate significantly in conversations that might in fact impact policy? Perhaps civic engagement should take place on an integrated continuum of scales, self-consciously balancing the importance of grassroots and direct service contexts with broader and larger scale attempts to address issues requiring structural changes and legislative action.

These themes and questions surface in very different ways in a volume
that combines contributions from teachers and scholars in higher education with those of nonprofit leaders and community activists. Including this range of voices and positions both conveys the array of strategies and activities undertaken on the ground and places the university in its proper context as one among many actors. For some contributors, however, the extreme dislocation of their experience surfaces in modes of discourse that transcend their social or institutional location. Particularly in the first section, “Coping with Disaster,” readers will see on occasion the rhetorical consequences of having to negotiate between personal loss and uncertainty and professional norms of discourse. The eclecticism within and among these selections, which range in content from data-focused exposition to personal witness and in tone from objective analysis to emotional urgency, accurately reflects the disorderly process of making sense of catastrophe. While these contributors are positioned within universities, the centrality of that place to their sense of what needs to be conveyed to a national audience in this volume varies widely.

The insecurity of the role of higher education in organizing and launching successful responses to the needs of people struggling to rebuild becomes evident in the second section, “New Beginnings.” Neither the visionary energy nor the specific programs and initiatives developed to lend immediate comfort and assistance to a damaged and rapidly changing population were the products of university leadership. While individuals situated in universities played a role in all of them—as consultants, collaborators, or documenters—the conception and implementation of these new beginnings emerged much closer to the ground. Small nonprofit organizations or faith-based groups in close contact with the needs and possibilities facing individuals and their families provided the urgency to implement responses, put programs in place quickly, and advocate for resources from sources of funding. It was here, not in the larger, better-resourced institutions of the city, that a “panic of empathy” took over. The need to act and act quickly motivated a powerful and often effective array of responses that provide multitudes of teachable moments for those of us in higher education.

Finally, and most hopefully, however, the crisis caused by this disaster has led to new connections, imaginative and productive collaborations, and a broadened appreciation for the role of culture in the rebuilding of communities. For the many times that those working in higher education failed to respond quickly or effectively to urgent needs, for the many times that opportunism and individual gain trumped strategic action for a larger
good, there were an equal number of innovative and committed attempts to bring the knowledge and resources of intellectual and creative expertise to the communities of New Orleans. Perhaps it is in the final section of this collection, “Interconnections,” that the astounding possibilities of genuine university-community partnership emerge. Even here, however, the reader will be hard pressed to find a single message, a unified platform for launching effective civic engagement. This necessary eclecticism of effort, however, need not translate into fragmentation. If the humanities, in particular, have a role to play in the emerging landscape of university-community collaborations in New Orleans—and perhaps nationally—it may well be in providing the interpretive glue that will surface, explain, and strengthen, through participation in the work of civic engagement, the connective tissue needed to secure a vibrant public sphere.

NOTES


2. Much of the information in this and the following paragraph comes from the work of Richard Campanella, particularly his most recent book, Geographies of New Orleans (Lafayette: Center for Louisiana Studies, 2006).


10. The numbers are difficult to pin down because they are still in flux. According to the Census Bureau’s 2006 figures, the Orleans Parish population was then approximately 59 percent African American. See the Greater New Orleans Community Data Center’s Web site for more information (gnocdc.org).


15. See George J. Sanchez, *Crossing Figueroa: The Tangled Web of Diversity and Democracy*, Imagining America: Foreseeable Futures, no. 4 (Ann Arbor: Imagining America, 2005), for a fuller description of this dilemma for civic engagement work in our era.