THINKING ABOUT WHAT GOT DONE in the arts and culture sector of New Orleans in the year following the storm, I am reminded of one of the principles of open space—a meeting facilitation technique—which asserts “whoever shows up are the right people.” Distressingly few of these were university faculty members or administrators in the arts and humanities disciplines. Individuals and small nonprofit organizations frequently got the most done with the fewest resources. They moved quickly to reestablish networks, actively invited participation by newcomers, and put programs on the ground in response to a fast, but well-informed, analysis of needs and opportunities. While people located in universities often established partnerships, formal and informal, with these programs, their driving force came from elsewhere.

Carol Bebelle was one of the most articulate advocates for the arts and culture to emerge after the storm. As cofounder and director of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center in New Orleans’ Central City neighborhood, she had for many years brought visibility to African and African American cultural practices. In the fall of 2005, she began opening Ashé to community groups and others that needed meeting space, making Ashé a hub for recovery activity. After being appointed to a committee of the Mayor’s Bring New Orleans Back Commission (the first attempt at recovery planning by
local government), Carol became a highly visible spokesperson for the centrality of the arts to the city’s revitalization. Unlike similarly positioned leaders who focused on infusing resources into large cultural institutions and tourism, she from the start attempted to give voice to the needs and contributions of traditional culture bearers and individual artists. Efforts of Grace, Ashé’s legal home, became the fiscal agent for numerous small projects and startup organizations. Carol herself generated a sense of warmth and possibility in the midst of crisis that gave those around her hope and strength. Moreover, the focus and vision she brought to the table gave confidence to funders who were worried about the capacity of New Orleans organizations to implement and administer large-scale initiatives. With an infusion of support from the Ford Foundation, she was able to purchase Ashé’s building, securing its tenure in a neighborhood desperately in need of stability. Other foundations also stepped forward, allowing Ashé’s role in the community to expand far beyond its prestorm capacity. Carol Bebelle’s contribution to this volume had its origin in a speech, and while not doing justice to the power of her personal presence, it exemplifies her gift for naming injustice while refusing victimhood and for honoring the past while staying focused on the future.

One of the projects Carol Bebelle assisted was Mat Schwarzman’s educational theater troupe for high school students, Creative Forces. Mat has been active in educational reform efforts incorporating the arts, and particularly theater, since I first met him at meetings of the Douglass Coalition, a loose group of community activists organized around supporting one of the city’s many failing high schools. We worked together in 2003 organizing the National Convergence of Artists, Educators, and Organizers, an event that served as my introduction to a rich and extensive network of community-based artists and educators. Deeply committed to the belief that creativity is a capacity we all share, though one too often squelched by or relinquished to mass media and the elite arts, he has spent his career looking for ways to incite and support the potential of youth to engage the world through the arts. Through the Crossroads Project, Mat has sought to communicate the insights gained from his experience and that of other community-based artists. Through Creative Forces, he is putting this experience to use in improving math and science education for New Orleans youth. While he has worked closely with university professors, particularly at Xavier University, Mat partners strategically with higher education, being careful to ensure that its interests and limitations do not define the agenda of his work.
A cautious but welcoming approach to higher education likewise characterized the efforts of D. Hamilton Simons-Jones and Kyshun Webster to fill a desperate need for youth programs in the summer of 2006. At the time, Kyshun was both special assistant to the president for community programs at Xavier University and executive director of Operation REACH, a nonprofit organization he founded as a student at Xavier. Hamilton was the director of community service at Tulane University. Neither one holds a university position any longer. I have known Hamilton since he was an undergraduate at Tulane in the late 1990s. As president of CACTUS (Community Action Caucus of Tulane University Students) and then a member of the Student Affairs staff, he had developed broad and deep relationships with community organizations and public schools in the city. These relationships enabled him to have an immediate impact once the university reopened. He organized service projects for Tulane and other college students and helped Carol Bebelle start the Mardi Gras Service Corps as a mechanism for integrating the city’s dual need for tourism dollars and volunteers. He and Kyshun Webster took on the urgent challenge of providing programs for middle school children returning to the city that summer not because they had a plan or funding or infrastructure but because they saw a need. Kyshun had years of experience in youth programming, a PhD in education, and a position at Xavier University that enabled him to leverage some of the university’s resources to meet this need. The two together deployed a national network of contacts in higher education and experience in fund-raising to recruit sponsors and college students to support and staff a summer camp. Since then, Operation REACH has been awarded a multi-million-dollar grant to replicate this program.

The new beginnings described in this section illustrate responses to changed conditions that did more than provide shelter and safety; they built on the knowledge and experience of their leaders to address circumstances both new to the city (the dearth of summer camps) and long-standing (poor education in math and science) in ways that leveraged the emergency in the service of a better future. In the same manner, the response of Hispanic-serving nonprofit organizations to the influx of Latino workers has begun to prepare the city for a browner future. Elizabeth Fussell’s research documents how the pre-Katrina Hispanic population of New Orleans reacted to this changing demographic. As mostly Mexican workers converged on the city to clean up and rebuild its physical landscape, organizations such as the Hispanic Apostolate of the Archdiocese of New Or-
leans braced for new demands on their services. A demographer by training, Beth watched carefully as the city began to repopulate, looking for any data available that could help her understand the likely impact of Hispanic migration on the city. In describing how an existing Hispanic population responded to these newcomers, she has laid the groundwork for understanding what will be a long and perhaps contentious story. The ambivalence of local governments to an increasing Hispanic population with the capacity to upset long-standing racial politics has been made repeatedly evident. Beth’s essay makes clear how crucial the advocacy of an established Hispanic population will be in protecting a vulnerable group of immigrant workers from injustice and exploitation.

Of all the new beginnings enabled or exacted by Katrina and its aftermath, this last may end up having the greatest impact on the culture of the city. Already as much Caribbean as American, New Orleans now has a plethora of taco trucks serving lunch to customers raised on gumbo and jambalaya. Every beginning has a past, however, and the legacies of New Orleans’ rich cultural traditions and failing institutions can be traced in each of the selections in this section. Each also exemplifies an ability to combine urgency with analysis and analysis with action. This combination of knowledge—both practical and theoretical—with a bias toward action characterized the most effective responses to the chaos and devastation of New Orleans. Perhaps there is a lesson for higher education here. Or, if not a lesson, perhaps a moment of clarifying insight about the ways in which civic engagement can and cannot happen in universities.