



2020 ANNUAL REPORT

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We will not forget the year 2020 and the mark that it made upon our lives. It was a year that began with a frightening and often mismanaged global pandemic that killed millions, was further shaped by a painful national confrontation on racial violence and injustice, and culminated in an insurrection by white supremacists, with the encouragement of an American president, at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

Twenty-twenty challenged our Mellon Foundation community, and held us to account through hundreds of days spent in physical isolation from one another, weeks spent grieving over who and what had been lost, and months spent determined to be as helpful as we could, however we could. We were challenged to be even more precise and even more persistent in our work, addressing our responsibility as the nation's largest funder of arts, culture, and the humanities. That Mellon moved surely and deftly through these challenges was due not to serendipity, but to the institutional analysis in which we already had been engaged, examining and reframing our mission and values within a new strategic direction and rigorously clarifying which problems we were trying to solve with our grantmaking.

Due to that dedicated process, 2020 was the year when we at Mellon made the shift to assessing all of our work in the arts and humanities through the lens of social justice. Because our new strategic direction debuted as the interconnected trauma and turbulence of COVID-19 and racial injustice unfolded, this shift proved to be especially potent. The speed with which our new focus allowed us to address the urgent needs of our grantees meant that, in less than twelve months, the Mellon Foundation made nearly \$200 million in emergency grantmaking—in addition to our regular \$300 million grant budget—to significantly support a vast range of organizations across the country.

Through our Arts and Culture program area, this funding sustained grantees such as dance companies that conceptualized innovative "bubble" residencies so that their artists could dance safely together with a mitigated risk of COVID-19, and—under the auspices of our Art Museums Futures Fund—small and mid-sized museums that had been financially devastated by the pandemic.

Transformative emergency grantmaking in our Higher Learning program area included a record contribution to the City University of New York for pandemic and racial justice initiatives that will support first-generation and low-income college students who have been working hard to earn an education despite the challenges of the past year.

And through our Public Knowledge program area, we supported visionary new research endeavors like the Black Teacher Archives—a collaboration among Historically Black Colleges and Universities' libraries and Harvard and Princeton Universities to archive and analyze the history of African American schoolteachers.

Centering history and critical knowledge—developing and -sharing in our work distinguished our grantmaking in 2020 and will continue to do so in the years to come. That is why, last summer, we launched a new program area, Humanities in Place, which will serve as the locus of all our grantmaking that is grounded in storytelling, preservation, and public spaces across the country.



The childhood home of musician and civil rights activist Nina Simone in Tryon, North Carolina—named a National Treasure by the National Trust in 2018. Photo by Nancy Pierce.

At the same time, our Public Affairs grants supported several organizations that provide vital food security and art therapy services for New Yorkers experiencing hunger or dementia—hardships that worsened in 2020 due to months of economic instability and physical isolation.

We also issued \$300 million in social bonds—unprecedented in Mellon's history—to further increase our flexibility and support our grantees. And even as we focused on our own institutional pandemic response, we joined with four philanthropic peers in announcing a collective \$1.7 billion commitment to support the United States' nonprofit ecosystem.

Our emergency funding affirmed that Mellon's shift to becoming a problem-solving Foundation has not represented a departure from our earlier work, but instead builds upon our legacy of championing ideas, imagination, and critical thinking, and of supporting the arts, culture, humanities, and higher learning as means of empowerment. We are both expanding and strengthening that legacy while making Mellon even more relevant to the communities we serve.

My own presidential grantmaking in 2020 drew upon this dynamic continuum of Mellon's past, present, and future. For years the Foundation has supported vital programs in prison higher learning throughout the US. In 2020, we partnered closely with and committed to an innovative three-year program—the Million Book Project, which will be based at Yale Law School's Justice Collaboratory. This initiative is the brainchild of the brilliant poet, lawyer, and scholar Reginald Dwayne Betts, and underscores the potentially liberatory self-knowledge that comes from deep reading. The Million Book Project will create 500-book "freedom libraries" at 1,000 medium- and maximum-security prisons in all 50 states plus Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico. Selection of the books, which will include fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, is already underway, with the list of titles expected for announcement later in 2021.



The Million Book Project, which will be based at Yale Law School's Justice Collaboratory, is the brainchild of poet, lawyer, and scholar Reginald Dwayne Betts. Photo: Michael Stravato/The New York Times

The significance of the Million Book Project lies not only in its affirmation of the dignity and right to learning of incarcerated people, but also in its recognition of the centrality of history and knowledge to developing critical consciousness of the world in which we live. Just as the 500-book freedom libraries will lift up the voices of a multiplicity of writers, artists, and scholars—and in so doing, illuminate new narratives and insights for those who read the texts—so, too, are we at the Mellon Foundation aiming to develop critical consciousness by expanding collective knowledge of who and what our historical record holds.

The most ambitious new effort we undertook last year—and the largest prospective commitment in Mellon's history—was the five-year, \$250 million Monuments Project. This initiative will help us better understand our collective past by supporting the development of commemorative spaces that speak to the full reach of our history, reflect our evolved understanding of those who have been most persistently memorialized, and ensure that future generations inherit monuments that capture the many different transformative contributions of the various peoples and movements that make up the American story.

Crucially, the Monuments Project will challenge us to ask—and answer—several key questions about how our history is told in public spaces: How do monuments of the past affect how we see ourselves in the present? How might depicting our history from new perspectives further racial justice? How might we correct erroneous mythologies currently propagated in our commemorative landscape? Initial grants issued under the Monuments Project include those to the CultureTrust Greater Philadelphia in support of the independent design studio Monument Lab, which is conducting an audit of our country's existing commemorative landscape; to the Social and Public Art Resource Center for its preservation and expansion of the epic historical mural *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*, which was designed by the artist Judith F. Baca and created through the collective work of painters, LA community members, and hundreds of young people; to US Biennial, Inc. in support of art triennial Prospect New Orleans's upcoming commemorative projects and programming centered in New Orleans's Tivoli Circle; and to a series of remarkable augmented reality, artist-designed monuments that explore LA history in partnership with the Los Angeles Museum County of Art and the technology company Snap, Inc.



Artist Judith F. Baca at work on The Great Wall of Los Angeles with community members in 1976. Photo: Social and Public Art Resource Center.

The years I have spent as a poet, scholar, educator, and cultural advocate have led me to believe that we must stand in the understanding that history is crisis and progress laid end to end forever. In 2020, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery galvanized many Americans into both a critical consciousness of racial injustice and a determination to eradicate it from the United States. It is imperative, however, for all of us to recognize that anti-Black violence and racial hatred did not commence with the deaths of these three individuals. As knowledge of our collective history has long shown, these murders exist on a continuum of systems of belief and power that continue to be entrenched in our country.

The Mellon Foundation kept a steady hand in addressing the widespread turmoil that arose around racial injustice, and in recognizing that an understanding of our current moment depends in part on that knowledge of our collective history. I have spent my whole life engaging with these issues, and in 2021—and beyond—I will continue to make clear how Mellon's work in the arts, culture, and humanities resonates with broader justice efforts across the United States.

We also will continue to look to those leaders whose unflinching grasp of the insights that history and knowledge offer serves as ongoing inspiration. These are the leaders who are not surprised by whatever revelations of crisis and progress our current moment may hold for us. One of them is Dr. Carla Hayden, our country's Librarian of Congress, whose institution we at Mellon were thrilled to support last year—through our Public Knowledge program area—with a grant titled *Of the People: Widening the Path*. This initiative will make the Library of Congress's digital archives more accessible to underresourced communities, and will encourage and support more members of these communities to become librarians and archivists themselves. These programs further illustrate Dr. Hayden's firm understanding of the Library of Congress as the people's library—a public library whose resources are accessible for anyone who wishes to enter its doors—and the institutional evolution she has guided throughout her tenure. As Mellon's own institutional evolution remains ongoing, Dr. Hayden is a visionary leader we will continue to learn from.

Looking ahead into the remaining months of 2021, I am energized by the work before us. We will issue an additional \$200 million in emergency grantmaking this year, and we will continue to affirm our new strategic direction with trusted tools and new thinking. We will keep using our voice to lift up the arts, culture, humanities, and higher learning; we will keep championing ideas, imagination, and critical thinking as vital to our collective recovery from the interconnected crises of COVID-19 and racial injustice. We will uphold our commitment to centering history and knowledge in all our work, to expanding access to learning and the freedom it grants, and to creating a more just society—both now and in the future.

My determined hope is that 2021 will be marked increasingly by possibility. With each day that passes we walk even farther into this new year, tempered by new ways of analyzing, challenging, and understanding one another and the post-pandemic world we now inhabit. We move forward, as always, strengthened even further by the words and the works of many extraordinary poets, thinkers, teachers, and activists that ask and answer the most precise questions, and bring buried truths to light.

The poet Muriel Rukeyser fully lived her commitments as a civic participant, and the power of her artistry carries large ideas forward in lucid lines. Though we are no longer in "the first century of the world wars," I thought often this past year of Rukeyser's words and those that followed—their sense of present urgency, and the need for a clear compass to guide unhesitating action. This is Rukeyser's "Poem," from 1968:

Poem

I lived in the first century of world wars.
Most mornings I would be more or less insane,
The newspapers would arrive with their careless stories,
The news would pour out of various devices
Interrupted by attempts to sell products to the unseen.
I would call my friends on other devices;
They would be more or less mad for similar reasons.
Slowly I would get pen to paper,
Make my poems for others unseen and unborn.
In the day I would be reminded of those men and women
Brave, setting up signals across vast distances,
Considering a nameless way of living, of almost unimagined values.
As the lights darkened, as the lights of night brightened,
We would try to imagine them, try to find each other.
To construct peace, to make love, to reconcile
Waking with sleeping, ourselves with each other,
Ourselves with ourselves. We would try by any means
To reach the limits of ourselves, to reach beyond ourselves,
To let go the means, to wake.

I lived in the first century of these wars.¹

How of this moment this great poem feels! "The news would pour out of various devices [...] / I would call my friends on other devices; / They would be more or less mad for similar reasons." The lines could have been written in 2020.

Through the frightening news, isolation, and despair, Rukeyser writes, "Slowly I would get pen to paper." This expressed drive to connect out of solitude, to put one's self to action for communities near and far—"setting up signals across vast distances"—moves me deeply and calls me to work. I am proud that in 2020 we at the Mellon Foundation tried "to reach beyond ourselves," and we will continue to do so moving forward.

Elizabeth Alexander
May 2021



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Arts and Culture

Artists know how to see beyond the familiar fence line and disrupt complacencies and habitual strategies...they set a high bar for shaping and sharing their ideas...which do not spring from the blinding malleability of American exceptionalism or entitlement, but from a persistent and deeply lived awareness of what is that can be put into service for what could be.¹

—Kristy Edmunds, Executive and Artistic Director
UCLA Center for the Art of Performance

In 2020 Mellon’s Arts and Culture (AC) program (formerly Arts and Cultural Heritage) launched its vision for an artist-centered society grounded in equity and justice. As Kristy Edmunds so eloquently shares above, the artists are at the vanguard of the change we seek for society. Under the leadership of Program Director Emil Kang, AC focused its grantmaking in support of the heroic artists and surrounding organizations innovating the field through a year of pandemic and social unrest, twin crises that accelerated long-needed institutional reform and recognition for artists, arts workers, and leaders of color.

In mid-2020, Kang and Program Officer Susan Feder, who has long guided AC’s work in the performing arts, welcomed new Program Officer Deborah Cullen-Morales, an accomplished curator and scholar who most recently led the Bronx Museum. Together with program staff, AC leadership took a multipronged response to the pandemic, issuing one-time urgent response grants and modifying its grantmaking cycles. First, it addressed the immediate needs of grantees by converting nearly \$10 million in restricted funds to be eligible for general operating costs and increasing its zero-interest loan fund. Next, AC established or collaborated with philanthropic partners on a series of vital initiatives that supported artists and small-to-midsized organizations deeply connected to their communities. Among these were the Artist Relief Fund, administered by United States Artists, which awarded \$5,000 grants to more than 3,900 individual artists across disciplines and demographics. In New York City, Mellon joined other local funders in the NYC COVID-19 Response and Impact Fund, which brought economic relief to nearly 400 small-to-midsized arts and cultural organizations across the five boroughs.

Across the US, major regranteeing initiatives centered the expertise of local organizations, often bringing Mellon funds to communities and organizations for the first time, a vital element of AC’s equity strategy. In a jointly conceived program with the six United States Regional Arts organizations, the US Regional Arts Resilience Fund deployed flexible funding to more than 200 arts organizations serving underresourced populations, communities, and/or art forms—86 percent of recipients were new to the Foundation. The five partners of the Mellon-funded Intercultural Leadership Institute (ILI) used their deeply personal nuanced knowledge of community-based artists, culture bearers, and cultural organizations to establish the Crisis Relief Grants program. Vicky Holt Takamine, executive director of ILI partner organization PA’I Foundation, says the grants would allow communities to “continue to hold and practice our cultural traditions in the face of adversity that gives us collective strength and a very unique perspective.”² The Foundation also provided key collaborative support to response initiatives in the cities of Los Angeles and Philadelphia as well as in the state of New Jersey.

Distanced by the pandemic, artists turned to digital platforms to continue their work and stay connected with their communities in 2020. Through frequent conversations with individual artists, AC staff learned that while artists embraced the shift to the virtual studio, digital platforms had limitations. “We need to be together; our well-being depends on it,” explains Alice Sheppard, artistic director of Kinetic Light, a disability arts ensemble. “Our dance style is highly physical, deeply personal, and dependent on intimate knowledge of each other’s bodies.” In response, AC launched a “bubble” residency initiative, allowing more than 350 dance artists and collaborators across nine companies and two presenting organizations to gather in person for multiweek creative residencies that followed medically supervised safety protocols. The companies, eight of which were first-time Mellon grantees, included Alonzo King LINES Ballet, A.I.M by Kyle Abraham, and Camille A. Brown & Dancers.



Performance of “Wired” by Kinetic Light: Alice, a dancer with light-brown skin and short curly hair, and Laurel, a dancer with pale skin and close-cropped blonde hair, hang from the ceiling. They each have one hand on a cable as they reach for each other with the other. They are nearly horizontal and their legs and feet face out. Silver barbed wire stretches between and beneath them, against the black backdrop. Photo: Kinetic Light

In addition to launching such innovative models and shifting investments to historically underfunded artists, communities and organizations, Mellon also supported work and collections previously neglected by philanthropy. With grants to Kenkeleba House and Howard University’s Gallery of Art, AC launched Critical Collections, a multiyear capacity-building effort to bolster collections featuring African American, Caribbean, and Latinx artists that aims to broaden the public’s understanding of American art and amplify stories that more fully reflect our diverse nation. Through the Art Museums Futures Fund (AMFF), AC prioritized museums with distinctive collections, such as the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, dedicated to LGBTQ+ art and to the artists who center the queer experience, and the Nevada Museum of Art, cofounded by a climate scientist, which maintains a scholarly focus on art and the environment. AMFF provided nearly \$27 million to 26 small-to-midsized museums, 62 percent of which were first-time grantees, with many located in smaller metropolitan areas. All AMFF grantees maintain deep ties to their local communities, demonstrating a commitment that continues to be central to AC’s grantmaking across sectors. In the performing arts, Penumbra Theater Company in Minneapolis is an exemplar of this. Under Artistic Director Sarah Bellamy, Penumbra reoriented its mission and programs to create an artist-centered Center for Racial Healing. The evolution prompted company member T. Mychael Rambo to reflect, and made him feel “purpose-filled, useful, and validated,” especially in the wake of the killing of George Floyd.³ In Los Angeles, Self-Help Graphics & Arts (SHG) led by Betty Avila, has long been dedicated to its Boyle Heights community. Founded by Chicano/a artists and printmakers and shaped by political uprisings of the 1970s, SHG continues to serve as a locus for Chicano/a and Latinx art, exhibitions, and training, as well as a gathering space for art and activism, providing a model to be studied and scaled.

If artists are to lead from the center of thriving communities, large-scale investment in new leadership is critical to driving institutional transformation. A grant to the Kennedy Center will support its Vice President for Social Impact Marc Bamuthi Joseph, the renowned spoken word artist, as he probes how the “nation’s performing arts center” can commit to his conviction that “if racism is structural, then anti-racism also must be structural.” AC also provided leadership funding for the Black Seed to build a capacious and national network of Black theaters working collaboratively toward future thriving. Billie Holiday Theatre Executive Director and project lead Dr. Indira Etwaroo describes Black Seed as an “optimistic enterprise developed by everyday leaders who serve on the front lines of leading Black institutions for Black artists and Black communities.” In the museum field, AC awarded a grant to Arizona State University (ASU) in support of Reaching the Museum, a two-year national effort to address inequities plaguing the field. Led by ASU Museum Director Miki Garcia and interdisciplinary artist Xaviera Simmons, the initiative invites a coalition of museum practitioners and artists to facilitated workshops to produce tools for “advocating for a transformation and redistribution of resources through rigorous and deep structural change,” says Simmons.

Shifting resources to individual artists is core to many of AC’s investments. In 2020, the program provided major capacity-building support to field leader Sean Dorsey and his company Fresh Meat Productions, the first dance company dedicated to trans art and justice. AC also renewed funding for the National Playwright Residency Program (NPRP), providing fourteen playwrights at thirteen theaters across the US with three years of salary and benefits, access to research and development funds, and opportunities for convening and documentation. While grants to Fresh Meat and NPRP better resource artists within existing arts infrastructures, Mellon funded Alaska Native Heritage Center’s development of a new social enterprise model that financially empowers and amplifies the work of Alaska Native artists. Such asset ownership and governance authority are core to financial freedom for artists, notes Angie Kim, president and CEO of the Center for Cultural Innovation (CCI). To that end, AC provided support to CCI to research and test business models that will further alternative economies for independent artists. Investments in bold infrastructure experiments such as these are foundational to the long-term livelihoods of artists as they lead us toward a more representative and inclusive future.



Dustin, Alaska Native Heritage Center’s former cultural programs manager, building a qayaq. Photo: Mike Conti/Alaska Native Heritage Center

Notes

Top photo: *i’m yours: Encounters with Art in Our Times*, a recent exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, which received an Art Museum Futures Fund grant. Photo: Mel Tainig.

1. Kristy Edmunds, “Public Care is Our Most Durable Good,” KCET, July 29, 2020, <https://www.kcet.org/shows/southland-sessions/kristy-edmunds-public-care-is-our-most-durable-good>.

2. Vicky Holt Takamine, quoted in “Crisis Relief Grants for Arts & Culture Leaders,” Intercultural Leadership Institute, August 27, 2020, <http://www.weareil.org/voices/ili-partners-announce-5-million-crisis-relief-grants-for-arts-culture-leaders>.

3. Rohan Preston, “St. Paul’s Penumbra gets a new name and a new mission: Promoting ‘arts, racial equity and wellness,’” *Star Tribune*, August 6, 2020, <https://www.startribune.com/st-paul-s-penumbra-gets-a-new-name-and-a-new-mission/572021402/>.



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Public Knowledge

Infrastructure is invisible—that is, until it breaks. In the jarring state of everyday life not existing as we expect it to, we become painfully aware of our dependency not only on the infrastructure that undergirds our day-to-day routines, basic goods, and commonplace interactions, but also on the often unseen people who operate and participate in these systems for our benefit and convenience.

In 2020, much of the knowledge infrastructure in the US—the human and technical scaffolding that supports our ability to create, preserve, and access the scholarly and cultural record—experienced its own kind of breaking. Teachers and students hastily reconvened in online classrooms while managing the distractions of shared living spaces. Community organizers and archivists postponed neighborhood events and pivoted to collecting oral histories over FaceTime. Our knowledge infrastructure, and our dependence upon it, became visible to us in revelatory ways, and called our attention to those who have sustained it for us for so long.

Making apparent and lifting up this critical knowledge infrastructure motivated 2020 grantmaking in Public Knowledge (PK), and will continue to drive the program’s support of the people and organizations that build, repair, and sustain the various technological systems and human networks that connect us to deep knowledge and recorded communal experience. Such grants include those awarded to the sixteen community-based archives selected from PK’s annual open call for proposals, as well as support for Florida International University’s efforts to incorporate community-centered practices to digitize and preserve collections at eight local cultural institutions.

Grants that aim to strengthen and build networks for knowledge-sharing resources, services, and collections were also a focus for the PK team in 2020. These projects enact what Todd Presner, chair of the digital humanities program at the University of California in Los Angeles calls an “ethic of participation and curation” centered in the ideal of “participation without condition,” and include efforts at the Library of Congress and the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center that bring together artists, students, researchers, and community members to remix and activate their institution’s archival collections in pursuit of social justice.



Archives Research Center at the Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library. Photo: Atlanta University Center.

Grantmaking can sometimes be best conceived as an appreciation of and advocacy for those “doing the work,” whether inside or independent of an institutional context. In this way, projects that support the innovative maintenance and sustainability of technology, tools, and infrastructure demonstrate Cornell University information sciences professor Steven Jackson’s call for “subtle acts of care” and repair that allow us to “love, and love deeply, a world of things”¹ that are essential to engaged knowledge work. Through grants to Washington State University to support the longevity of a collaborative curation platform for Native American collections, and to scholarly presses to sustain the production, distribution, and discovery of long-form digital publications in the humanities, PK strengthens its commitment to this caretaking.

Although many of us are eager to leave an unusually difficult 2020 behind, we in PK want to use this time to think ahead to 2021 and beyond, and to ask how we can best support the craft of continuous building and its extensions—repairing, recovering, reconstructing—in ways that promote commitment to knowledge, and to transformative effect. As a Mellon Foundation program reinvented and renamed after two decades of operation as Scholarly Communications, PK recognizes that strains on the knowledge infrastructure in 2020 have afforded us an opportunity to pivot our grantmaking activity away from support for a predominantly scholarly knowledge system, and toward a new public knowledge infrastructure—a vibrant, inclusive, and nimble one that connects us all and endures for years to come.

Notes

Top photo: Interference Archive, a community archives grantee based in Brooklyn.

1. Steven Jackson, “Rethinking Repair,” in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality, and Society*, ed. Tarleton Gillespie, Pablo J. Boczkowski, and Kirsten A. Foot (MIT Press Scholarship Online, September 2014).



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Higher Learning

For the Higher Learning program (formerly Higher Education and Scholarship in the Humanities), 2020 was a year of challenge, opportunity, and revision. To align with the Foundation’s refined mission, the redesignated program clarified its priorities while responding nimbly to the unprecedented and rapidly evolving crisis conditions of a global pandemic.

Senior Program Officers Armando Bengochea and Dianne Harris led Higher Learning (HL) until October 1, when they were joined by newly appointed Program Director Phillip Brian Harper. By then, the global community had been in the grips of the COVID-19 pandemic for nearly seven months, and much of the program’s grantmaking had addressed the urgent needs within the higher education sector. At the same time, HL shifted its overall grantmaking strategy to reflect the Foundation’s sharpened focus on social justice. Higher Learning is now explicitly dedicated to creating equitable broader access to humanities higher learning opportunities; supporting undergraduate and graduate humanities education that builds on and centers more complete and accurate narratives; elevating the ideas and knowledge that help inspire and illuminate our shared human experience; and accelerating the demographic transformation of the academy—including the faculty and institutional leaders—to better reflect the US population.

The program’s COVID-response efforts aligned closely with its commitment to creating equitable broad access to humanities educational opportunities. Emergency grants were made to students at sixteen Historically Black Colleges and Universities, across all City University of New York campuses, and, through a grant to the American Indian College Fund, students at Tribal Colleges and Universities. Those who received funding in the spring were able to reenroll in the fall, ensuring their own academic progress as well as helping to secure the financial stability of their respective institutions. Significant emergency funding was also directed to Mellon-supported programs for incarcerated students—a population particularly vulnerable to the ravages of the coronavirus.

Higher Learning’s objective of broadening access to higher education was advanced significantly by the program’s non-COVID grantmaking as well. To ease the transfer pathway from community colleges to universities, HL renewed funding for its Community College-University Partnerships initiative. A grant to Gallaudet University will help the institution implement visually centered and American Sign Language-English bilingual learning models that are more culturally responsive to the hearing-impaired and deaf learners who comprise most of the university’s student population. In July, the program issued an open call for innovative proposals on the Future of Higher Learning in Prison, ultimately awarding grants to seventeen organizations that are implementing visionary, humanities-centered educational practices for incarcerated students with particular emphasis on lessons stemming from the COVID crisis and on the prospects for combating anti-Black racism within the nation’s law-enforcement system. The work of these grantees amplifies and expands the Foundation’s robust and ongoing support of programs that provide college- and university-level instruction in US prisons.



Washington University in St. Louis Prison Education Project students. Photo: Washington University.

Support for a new social justice institute and related major at Tougaloo College and for a new program in African American and African Diasporic cultures at Xavier University of Louisiana will help foster a deeper academic engagement with social justice concerns. Those projects contribute to the elevation of ideas and knowledge, as do several other initiatives, including the Leading Edge Fellowships sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies, through which recent humanities PhDs are granted twelve-month placements in social justice nonprofits or government organizations and thus demonstrate the value of advanced humanities training in those contexts; and the International Dissertation Research Fellowships awarded by the Social Science Research Council, which enable select US graduate students to conduct rigorous, culturally nuanced, and site-specific dissertation research abroad.

In the interest of promoting more accurate narratives within humanities pedagogy, HL supported the recovery and publicization of marginalized peoples’ suppressed place-based histories through initiatives undertaken at three different universities. The University of Virginia will draw on the highly racialized cultural landscape it occupies and the unique special collections and assets it holds to generate a new curricular program through which undergraduates will study the university’s past and engage with its present to develop the expertise required for the creation of a more equitable future. Through final Architecture and Urban Humanities grants to the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of California at Berkeley, each of these institutions will recruit undergraduates to collaborate with community organizations to produce oral histories and “thick maps” to contextualize the multilayered stories of marginalized populations in the university’s own environs.

Many of the projects that HL supported in 2020 involved intensive engagement by colleges and universities with their local communities, and such activity promises to constitute a significant area of focus for the program throughout the foreseeable future. These initiatives, including collaboration between local correctional facilities and narrative-medicine associations (in the case of Lewis & Clark College’s Healing Social Suffering Through Narrative project) and grassroots immigrants’ rights groups working with environmentalist racial-justice organizations (in Skidmore College’s Community Collaborative Documentary Projects), comprise genuine partnerships in which the academic institutions and the community organizations are equal co-creators of knowledge—an arrangement that the HL program sees as crucial to their viability.

Notably, such partnerships were a hallmark of the successful proposals in the Just Futures Initiative, a limited-submission competition through which sixteen college- and university-based teams were selected to implement large-scale humanities-centered projects designed to further racial justice and social equality in bold and imaginative ways. Higher Learning will issue additional calls for proposals that align with its grantmaking strategies in the coming years, and in the meantime, it has refined its proposal invitations for its longstanding Sawyer Seminars and New Directions Fellowships so that those competitions, too, reflect its newly articulated funding priorities.

By 2020, the Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellowship Program—Higher Learning’s flagship initiative to diversify the professoriate—had seen nearly 1,000 students through completion of the PhD, with hundreds of fellows in tenured, tenure-track, post-doctoral, and other teaching and research positions throughout the United States and Puerto Rico. With the adoption of its new strategic framework, HL has rededicated itself to ensuring that the US professoriate and academic leadership represent as fully as possible the broad constituencies they serve—both in social-demographic and, where applicable, academic-disciplinary terms. Higher Learning remains committed to increasing the number of students of color who pursue humanities doctoral work and subsequently join faculty ranks, the number of men of color and women of all races among top-level academic leadership, and the number of humanities scholars serving as provosts and presidents at the nation’s research universities. To this end, the program in 2020 funded postdoctoral fellow-to-faculty hiring programs in key academic areas at the University of Virginia and The New School; continued to underwrite the Mellon Emerging Faculty Leaders Award, administered by the nonprofit Institute for Citizens & Scholars, which supports advanced assistant professors who have demonstrated leadership in fostering diverse and inclusive campus communities; and subsidized leadership-development initiatives undertaken by Swarthmore College and Case Western Reserve University.

Because a diversified faculty is by definition one that is deeply involved in community-engaged scholarship and in other “non-traditional” forms of knowledge production and circulation, Higher Learning will work vigorously in the coming years to ensure that this work is recognized and valued in the hiring, tenuring, and promotion of humanities faculty members at higher education institutions of all types across the United States.



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Public Affairs

The Public Affairs program, led by Michele S. Warman, the Foundation’s Executive Vice President, Chief Operating Officer, General Counsel and Secretary, is committed to serving Mellon’s home community of New York City in times of extraordinary need, to building a more just society, and to fostering human agency, dignity, and wellbeing. In the spirit of the words of social justice leader and former New York City Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Public Affairs (PA) aims to be a “catalyst for change.” Throughout 2020, PA strengthened and expanded its significant commitments to catalyzing change through programs that supported food security, racial equity, disability inclusion, and civic engagement.

As the COVID-19 pandemic engulfed New York in spring 2020, PA issued emergency funds to address food insecurity for the city’s most vulnerable populations. Grants were made to Citymeals-On-Wheels and God’s Love We Deliver—organizations that provide meals to homebound elderly and the chronically ill—as well as to GrowNYC, which maintains food distribution sites throughout the five boroughs, and to the Campaign for a Food Secure CUNY, an initiative to promote food access for City University of New York students, nearly half of whom experience food insecurity during the school year.

Even as PA helped address New York’s urgent needs, the program contributed to building a more just society by funding visionary projects that advance national learning and conversations about race and equity. These included *PBS NewsHour*’s “Race Matters” series, which covered topics such as the murder of George Floyd, the stark social and health inequities exposed by COVID-19, and artists’ responses to racial injustice, as well as support for a study of the persistent justice gap in America’s promise of equality under the law, and the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund’s early planning to make its rich archives of civil rights history more accessible to staff, researchers, and the public.

PA also funded inclusive artistic programming that affirms human dignity and wellbeing, and that is welcoming and accessible to broad and diverse communities. Support went to city-wide and national programming tailored to individuals with dementia—a substantial and growing population—and their caregivers for live interactive concerts and classes on dance, theater, and the visual arts, guided by trained educators and teaching artists. As the pandemic unfolded, grantees immediately pivoted to virtual programming, which allowed organizations to reach individuals in their homes and residential care facilities and expanded participation at a time of extreme isolation. Staff expect that virtual programming will remain an important component of inclusive arts programming going forward.



In the Bronx, before the pandemic struck, Caring Kind partnered with Ailey Arts in Education on this Connect2culture program for adults with dementia and their caregivers. Photo: Caring Kind

In addition, PA helped promote civic engagement in 2020 with support for the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS) and its exhibitions designed to engage, educate, and inspire young, first-time voters. By utilizing museum objects such as the first US Census in 1790 and memorable political television advertisements ranging from “I Like Ike” for Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1952 to the “Yes We Can” music video in support of Barack Obama in 2008, N-YHS conveyed the historic significance of voting to the health and vibrancy of democracy.

Finally, PA grantmaking funded efforts to increase accountability, transparency, and knowledge sharing in the philanthropic sector. Grants supported capacity building and training for nonprofits in New York; assessment and learning tools for funders; and data collection and sharing about the operations, programs, and communities served by foundations and nonprofit organizations.