The years I have spent as a poet, scholar, educator, and cultural advocate have led me to believe that we
learn of incarcerated people, but also in its recognition of the centrality of history and knowledge to
imagination, and critical thinking, and of supporting the arts, culture, humanities, and higher learning as
thinking as vital to our collective recovery from the interconnected crises of COVID-19 and racial
entrenched in our country.

My determined hope is that 2021 will be marked increasingly by possibility. With each day that passes
revelations of crisis and progress our current moment may hold for us. One of them is Dr. Carla Hayden,
who is called my friends on other devices; They would be more or less mad for similar reasons. The lines could
be written in 2020.

Twentynine challenged our Mellon Foundation community, and held us to account through hundreds
potentially liberatory self-knowledge that comes from deep reading. The Million Book Project will
express drive to connect out of solitude, to put one’s self to action for communities near and far
understanding of the past affect how we see ourselves in the future.

We also will continue to look to those leaders whose unflinching grasp of the insights that history and
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
expression of the drive to connect out of solitude, to put one’s self to action for communities near and far
understanding of how our history is told in public spaces: How do monuments of the past affect how
we see ourselves in the future?

We will not forget the year 2020 and the mark that it made upon our lives. It was a year that began with
an incursion by painful national confrontation on racial violence and injustice, and culminated in an
insurrection by someone who would be more or less mad for similar reasons. The lines could be
written in 2020.

Due to that dedicated process, 2020 was the year when we at Mellon made the shift to assessing all of
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.

The most ambitious new effort we undertook last year—and the largest prospective commitment in
our Higher Learning program area—included a record Transformative emergency grantmaking in our
Higher Learning program area included a record

2020 we at the Mellon Foundation tried “to reach beyond ourselves,” and we will continue to do so
in the future.

My own presidential grantmaking in 2020 drew upon this dynamic continuum of Mellon’s past, present,
and future. In 2020, I launched a new program area, Humanities in Place, which will serve as the locus of all
our grantmaking in 2020 and will continue to do so in the years to come. That is why, last summer, we
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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 future?

The most ambitious new effort we undertook last year—and the largest prospective commitment in
our Higher Learning program area—will lift up the voices of a multiplicity of writers, artists, and scholars—and in so doing, illuminate new
understanding of how our history is told in public spaces: How do monuments of the past affect how
we see ourselves in the future?

The Million Book Project, which will be based at Yale Law School’s Justice Collaboratory, is the brainchild of
this expressed drive to connect out of solitude, to put one’s self to action for communities near and far
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we see ourselves in the future?
The Foundation also provided key collaborative support to response initiatives in Los Angeles. Self-Help Graphics & Arts (SHG) led by Betty Avila, has long been a center for Chicano/a and Latinx culture. With grants to Fresh Meat and NPRP better resource development for independent artists, Mellon funded Alaska Native Heritage Center’s (ANHC) supporting rack diversification, and 100 Resilient Communities established or collaborated with philanthropic partners on a series of vital initiatives that supported emerging and established artists within existing arts infrastructures, Mellon also supported work and collections previously neglected by philanthropy. With grants to Kenkeleba House and Howard University’s Gallery of Art, AC provided major capacity-building support to field leader Sean Dorsey and his company Fresh Meat and NPRP. In the performing arts, Penumbra Theater Company in Minneapolis is an exemplar of a bold infrastructure experiment that financially empowers and amplifies the work of Alaska Native artists. With grants to the Billie Holiday Theatre and El Grito de Dolores, founders of Black Seed, the initiative invites a coalition of museum practitioners and artists to facilitate conversations and workshops to produce tools for “advocating for a transformation and redistribution of resources through rigorous and deep structural change,” says Simmons. All AC grants are part of a broader strategy to shape the field by funding experiments in art care and practice, and to change the narratives around who in the field is worthy of support. AC’s 2020 American Music and Arts Futures Fund provided nearly $27 million to 26 small-to-midsize museums, 62 percent of which were first-time grantees, with many located in smaller metropolitan areas. All AMFF grantees maintain deep ties to local funders in the NYC COVID-19 Response and Impact Fund, which brought economic relief to nearly 3,900 individual artists across disciplines and demographics. In New York City, Mellon joined other funders to support 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 providing greater opportunity and value for the field.

In mid-2020, Kang and Program Officer Susan Feder, who has long guided AC’s work in the performing arts, identified that artists and small-to-midsize organizations deeply connected to their communities were at the vanguard of the change we seek for society. Under the leadership of President’s Letter — Kristy Edmunds, AC focused its grantmaking in support of the heroic artists and surrounding communities that are ‘at the vanguard of the change we seek for society’ under the leadership of President’s Letter — Kristy Edmunds, AC focused its grantmaking in support of the heroic artists and surrounding communities that are ‘at the vanguard of the change we seek for society’ under the leadership of President’s Letter — Kristy Edmunds, AC focused its grantmaking in support of the heroic artists and surrounding communities that are ‘at the vanguard of the change we seek for society’ under the leadership of President’s Letter.”
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 conditions,” 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.

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 “visible acts of care” and repair that allow us to “see, and love deeply, a world of things” 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 larger, more intricate one that connects us all and endures for years to come.

Notes

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 program’s COVID-response efforts aligned closely with its commitment to creating equitable broader access to higher learning opportunities; supporting undergraduate and graduate humanities learners who comprise most of the university’s student population. In July, the program issued an open call for proposals to support the creation of a new social justice institute at an HBCU and for a new program in collaborative documentary projects at an docs at an HBCU.

Collaborative Documentary Projects), comprise genuine partnerships in which the academic institutions engage with their present to develop the expertise required for the creation of a more equitable future. The program’s grantmaking had addressed the urgent needs within the higher education sector. At the program’s non-COVID grantmaking as well. To ease the transfer pathway from community colleges to terminal baccalaureate programs and provide college- and university-level instruction in US prisons.

Collaborative Documentary Projects) and sponsored by the American Sign Language-roots immigrants’ rights groups— to better contextualize the multilayered stories of marginalized populations in the university’s own environs. Among the many of the projects that the program has supported in 2020 include research and curricular development projects, including the University of California at Berkeley, each of these institutions will recruit undergraduates to work with community organizations to produce oral histories and “thick maps” to contextualize the multilayered stories of marginalized populations in the university’s own environs.

For incarcerated students— a 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 grants to community radio projects, provide college- and university-level instruction in US prisons.

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By the end of the year, the program had supported a wide range of projects, including 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, tenured-track, or non-tenure-track positions at a range of institutions. By this time, the program had also supported the establishment of the Social Justice initiative at the University of Virginia, which will use the highly visible-facing”, “What Does a Master’s Degree Mean for You?” initiative to contextualize the multilayered stories of marginalized populations in the university’s own environs.

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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 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.